

Unsung Hero: A Reflection on Cultural Barriers and Stereotypes

What makes Batman a great superhero? Is it that he is brilliant beyond conception or so strong that he could level foundations with a single punch? No, because he is not. Batman is a hero who does not have super powers at all actually. He is a masked figure who gives of himself to a world entirely different than his own for a people who do not respect or care for him the way he does them. Batman constantly gives himself over, though he is completely misunderstood and alone. He is the hero that we wish we could be, not because he gets the girl, but because he has a strength no physique could possibly display. This masked hero is not just a comic book hero though, but a man who walks among us each and every day. He is our ESL students, who fight for a people that do not fully understand him; he gives of himself beyond measure, and is but a mere mortal man.

I had the opportunity the other day to sit down with one of the ESL students and we spent the better part of 40 minutes talking in broken English. As we stumbled through words and tried to figure out how to speak the same language, I started to realize something that I had been blind to for years: these men are not odd or unusual, nor are they even normal, but extraordinary exemplars of the faith. Before me was a man who left behind his home, his friends, his family, everything he ever knew and loved, to chase after Christ in a foreign world, speaking a brand new language, combating social changes, masters level academic classes, and all the demons trying to keep him from rising to the glory God has rightfully called him to. He was a man who is after Christ's own heart, a true man's man, yet it is so easy to cast them aside because they don't "fit in," they don't "speak the same as me," "they're different." Christ did not speak the same as those around him either, nor did he fit in.

We have stereotypes in place that influence our perception of people. One of my stereotypes has been that ESL students are shy and unwilling to socialize, and I could not be any further from the truth! From my experience, they want so badly to talk, to have a discussion, to share their passions, their hopes, their dreams, their faith, but that means allowing ourselves to look beyond the barriers and stigmatism. It is so easy to allow stereotypes to form because of cultural differences, which often lead to inaccurate assumptions and cause us to misunderstand a person at their fundamental core, sabotaging the ability to form relationships and furthering the stereotype because we find they don't "fit" into our nice, little box. They are people, infinitely more dynamic and adventurous as our minds can conceive; how could they fit in that box?

All people are people. Crazy thought, but it's the truth. When we start to understand that, and just how dynamic people are, we begin to realize how flawed stereotypes are and how dramatic of a role cultural differences play in our social integration. Things that are common place for me are totally foreign to some of my friends from other cultures. At an even more micro level, there are habits I learned specifically from my family that members of my greater social circle are not accustomed to that have an effect on our relationships and how they may perceive me. An example of this would be a greater use of hand signals, noises, and assertions rather than words or politely asking for things. This is not because we mean to rudely demand something, but because there is a certain level of understanding in our interpersonal communication that when someone needs something you give it to them; there is no need to ask or thank someone because it is assumed that we rely on each other and by proxy expect others to rely on us. Taking it back to the macro then, we are all victims of stereotyping and making assumptions based on a lack of understanding of one's macro or micro cultural upbringing. There is a great yearning in humans to be understood and to be received by those around us. How much

more so, then, is the longing in our ESL brothers, who can get left out of conversations because English is not their first language? The barriers of culture cause us to assume so much, formulating stereotypes, and causing divides between us and some of the greatest exemplars of the faith around.

These men are heroes. They are the masked warrior who fights in the shadows for our salvation, giving all they have for a people that does not understand them. Unlike Batman, they want to be known. They want to be understood. They are our brothers, they are us, for we are one in the same in Christ. Barriers like culture and the presumptions we make as a result are what sows seeds of disconnect in the body of Christ. We are one in God, so we must rise above the secular notions to see with God's eyes, to hear with God's ears, and to love with God's heart, and be heroes Gotham deserves.