

“Different People”

By: Doug Warren

Summer is here . . .what do I do with all these crazy people in my life?

The nice weather brings with it changes in our schedules, routines, and circles of friends. This change in the people we are around day-to-day often prompts people to ask me why they feel uneasy around different types of people and what they can do about it. Those are good questions for all of us to look at.

The first thing for us to do is to admit that we all have difficulty with people who are different than we are. Not all of us react the same way or respond to the same types of differences, but all of us experience some level of discomfort when we find ourselves face to face with another person with significant differences.

In order to know what to do about it, we need to understand what is behind our response to diversity. We are all tempted to treat other people as objects rather than individuals. This gets expressed in many varied ways. It can be as obvious as the way you use other people at work to accomplish your agenda or as complex as the way you gravitate towards people who make you feel significant. Whatever the expression, the underlying dynamic is the same. We tend to relate to others in very self-serving ways.

When someone different from us enters the picture (whether the difference is in skin color, culture, language, body piercing, etc.) these same dynamics are present. We may simply ignore the other person because we see no benefit from engaging him or her. We may actively confront the other person, be it with hostility or humor, in order to fend them off. Or we may try another tactic to manipulate her or him or others in the situation. However we tend to respond, we are seeking to maintain our place in the world against a perceived threat in someone different from us.

Why do we see other people as threats? All of us are constantly engaged in the task of self-justification. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we are continuously seeking to show that we are valid as workers, family members, humans, or fill in the category. When we encounter someone with significant differences from us, it invariably calls into question our validity.

Let me give some examples. If part of my self-identity is wrapped up in my work ethic, then it is likely to really fry my circuit board to interact with someone whom I perceive as lazy. If I delight in my skepticism of formal bureaucracy, I will likely have nothing but contempt for someone I believe to be a stooge of the system. If my strict adherence to a moral code is the reason I feel like I am okay, then no one will steam my biscuits like someone I deem immoral.

It may also be that the other person's differences are not the immediate source of my anxiety, but rather that their presence challenges something that is precious to me. For instance, if I value harmony in relationships, the presence of someone who rocks the boat may be very disturbing. Or it may be that I value comfort and the presence of someone new requires my doing something uncomfortable.

So what can we do about these things? The only way to avoid treating other people as objects is to see them for what they really are—valuable reflections of our Creator. See, you knew I would bring God into this! But before you turn to another page of the paper, hear me out. I promise this is relevant to your interaction with other people.

The problem with how we interact with other people is that we view them through our identity instead of through theirs. What I mean is that we are constantly evaluating, on some level, what they can do for us, because *we* are what is truly important. Instead we need to see them through God's eyes. We need to see that everyone is valuable because God has made us to express His inestimable value. When we approach people based on this reality, no one can threaten our validity because we both have the same identity no matter our differences.

Jesus came as the image of the invisible God. He shows us what we are meant to reflect. He willingly sacrificed Himself for us. He came to serve rather than to be served. He honored the God-given value in all the people He interacted with, even those who tortured and killed Him. He serves not only as a model for our imitation, but in His life and death He secured for us the fullness of our rescue from our self-serving proclivities.

This frees us to consider others as more important than ourselves. When encountering someone with differences, our reaction can take into account their concerns, uncertainties, and discomfort. What might help them to fully reflect God's character in this situation and how might I aid in that?

This summer my prayer for you and all our neighbors is that we may respond to others based on their value instead of our insecurities. Let us find our security in Jesus and in Him know the freedom to love others with all their varied differences.