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HERMANAS

DEEPENING OUR IDENTITY
AND GROWING OUR INFLUENCE

Taken from *Hermanas* by Natalia Kohn,
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ESTHER

WHO AM I? A MESTIZA FOR GOD'S MISSION

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It was a comment that burned in my soul. “That’s just like those lazy Mexican workers to sit in the shade instead of work hard.” I heard these terrible words one day as I ate my lunch across the table from some Christian friends. These were people I had come to love since coming to faith, yet there they were complaining about some hired day laborers whom they had witnessed eating their lunch in the shade outside their house that weekend.

I thought of my cousin who spent most of his weeks working outside in the heat of the day, having to learn when to take breaks to avoid passing out from the sun beating down on his body. I thought of my uncle who experienced a heat stroke after being in the sun on a 105-degree day. Above all, though, I thought of my paternal and maternal grandparents who worked the land from morning till evening as farmworkers and sharecroppers. All of these stories swirled in my head as I excused myself from the table with a plate still full of food



but with an upset stomach. The experience was painful. It was also not uncommon.

Even as a young teenager from South Texas, a majority Latino part of the state, I found myself in a predominantly white Christian community after coming to faith. This reality continued through high school, college, and on into my early twenties. While my white Christian brothers and sisters knew my last name was Garza, my fair skin often left them forgetting that their racist comments were being said in front of a Mexican American woman. It was a situation I didn't know how to steward well so I mostly just exited awkward conversations, avoided certain topics, and left many tables where prejudiced language fell from the tongues of people I called friends.

But it was also in these same communities where I was learning more and more about the God who loved me and who gave his Son to take away the sins of the world. *Los pecados del mundo* were the words that would ring in my ears every time I heard that phrase in English, a byproduct of my days of sporadically attending predominantly Latino churches as a child. But I never dared speak those words out loud. I wanted nothing more than to fit in with those around me during that early season of my Christian life. I didn't know how to handle the pain I experienced when my white friends would utter hateful words against my community, so I just swallowed their comments and distanced myself from whatever it was that they labeled as "other." I never spoke of my family traditions, I evaded questions about culture, and I never invited them in to any of my stories.

I remember when a white friend of mine came to my home for the first time and saw my *quinceañera* pictures framed in our hallway, she was surprised and asked if I had married. I told her

that no, the pictures were of my sweet sixteen party. Oh, how I knew it was so much more than a sweet sixteen party! But in that moment, I didn't want to explain or share with her how rich the experience was for me. I didn't want to tell her how I felt like such a child on that day, yet also like a young woman who was moving toward adulthood. Such stories were beautiful and meaningful, yet they were narratives no one around me would understand or consider normal. I just wanted to be "normal." So I stored my cultural narratives away in the past, and pressed on toward what was ahead like the apostle Paul spoke about in the Scriptures. Somehow I thought Paul meant my culture too, and no one around me in my faith community seemed to think it important to tell me otherwise.

Interestingly, it was in preparation for my *quinceañera* in our family's church several months before my conversion where I first heard the story of Esther. I had a *Madrina* named Esther, but I wasn't aware that she was also a woman in the Bible! I never could have imagined then how the Lord would use Esther's story to shape my life. But he knew.

**HIDDEN IDENTITY AND OPEN DOORS:
ESTHER'S STORY AND MY OWN**

Esther was a Jewish woman being raised by a cousin named Mordecai. The Jews were an ethnic minority community displaced and dispersed all over the provinces of King Xerxes of Persia. The story opens with a picture of what life was like for a queen who was at the whim of a narcissistic king. In a tragic turn of events, Queen Vashti rightfully refused to be paraded in front of a crowd of likely drunk men for the pleasure of the king. As a result, King Xerxes banned her from the kingdom and later sought to replace

her with another. She may have been queen of Persia, but she was still only a woman seen as dispensable and replaceable in a patriarchal society. While it was an unjust ending to Queen Vashti's reign, it was her act of defiance that opened the door for Esther to step into the king's palace.

Initially, Mordecai told Esther to keep her ethnicity a secret from others, which leads one to believe Esther was able to assimilate well into Persian culture. She was a *mestiza*, a bicultural woman holding on to two cultural worlds.¹ She fit in with the dominant culture of the time, and the Lord granted her favor in a situation that was challenging and oppressive in many ways.

While I struggled with using my voice when the majority culture community spoke poorly of my ethnic group, this was also a sign that I had assimilated to the dominant culture around me. As a *mestiza*, bicultural woman having my feet planted in two different cultural worlds, I too knew how to fit in within majority culture while being raised in a Mexican American family. Much like Esther, people didn't immediately know I was part of a minority community. If I didn't volunteer the information, my light skin and poor Spanish skills left people making assumptions about my identity and what life was like for me.

To my Latino family, my fair complexion and lack of fluency in the language of my roots made me an outsider. Whenever I went to Mexico to visit relatives, I was known as a foreigner who didn't belong. Yet back in America I knew I didn't quite fit either, even if on the surface I appeared to be at home among the dominant culture of the United States. While both spaces felt comfortable to me and both were part of me, neither felt like home. It can be challenging to live in this liminal space, but like Esther, I found it opened doors for me, as well.

As a new Christian in a majority white faith community, people would often ask me, “So, what are you? Are you Mexican? Are you white? Are you both?” By all visible markers, I appeared to be just like them, yet they knew my surname was different. In their struggle to place me, they would ask me to answer these awkward questions. The answer, however, wasn’t complex at all. The answer was yes, I simply was Latina. My parents were both Latino.

It was, however, from my maternal lineage that I was likely given the color of my skin. Once as an adult, I asked my mother why she was much lighter than her siblings. She said that her mother used to tell her she came out so much lighter than her other children because when pregnant with my mom she had swallowed too much Epsom salt. While this sounded innocuous and like an old wives’ tale, it was devastating to find out that this was actually the method poor Latina women were told would allow them to abort an unwanted child. Because of stories like these, my mother didn’t know much about her own heritage except that my grandparents never learned to speak English and they all worked on a farm owned by a white family. While there was much my mom spoke of fondly about her own childhood, I knew there were dark corners she held close to her heart. I never asked again about the color of my skin.

What my mom experienced in this painful story was a terrible sin committed against her. It was the sin of communicating that she wasn’t valuable or wanted, which was ultimately a marring of the image of God in her from such a young age. The story of Esther too is a story of brokenness and sin that surrounded her. She lived in a society that spoke of women as less than and replaceable. But God, even in the midst of unjust realities, still opened up doors for her.

So despite the story behind my light complexion being laced with brokenness, it was also still a part of me. But when white friends would ask their curious questions, I would answer with ambiguity and change the subject quickly, eager to hide that I was in fact quite different from them in many ways. I, much like Esther, wanted to keep it a secret.

THE RISKY CHOICE OF SOLIDARITY

Because of the favor God gave to Esther among those in the royal palace, she was able to win the king's affections and be crowned the new queen of Persia. She continued to keep her ethnicity hidden, just as Mordecai had told her. This was how things stayed until Haman, one of King Xerxes's trusted allies, decided that destroying all the Jews was the perfect revenge against his enemy Mordecai. Haman hated Mordecai because he never bowed before him as others did when they saw him. Mordecai bowed to no one but God. Because of this, Haman persuaded the king to order that all the Jews be destroyed because, according to him, they weren't loyal subjects.

When Mordecai discovered this, he turned to the cousin he had raised as a daughter and who now found herself in the chambers of the seat of power. He and all of the Jews needed Esther to stop hiding and embrace all of who she was for the sake of her people, even if at great risk to herself. It would cost her everything, and she knew it. But Mordecai pressed her with the words, "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). Perhaps this was the whole reason the Lord had opened up these doors of favor. Could it have always been for the purpose of rescuing his people? As Esther moved forward and risked it all to save the Jews, it seems the answer was yes.

Biblical scholar Walter Kaiser writes that if the Old Testament were to have a Great Commission verse, it would be Genesis 12:3, that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through [Abraham].” He claims this verse is “the earliest statement of God’s purpose and plan to see that the message of his grace and blessing comes to every person on planet earth.”² Esther’s role in this Old Testament Commission was no small part. God used his mestiza queen of Persia at a crucial moment in his redemptive history, and she bravely took up this role with dignity.

I continued in my assimilated world for many years after coming to faith. It wasn’t until I moved overseas with my husband that the Lord brought back to mind my ethnicity and culture. Early on in my marriage, my husband, Eric, and I moved to the Arab world to serve with a parachurch ministry alongside local believers in North Africa. There was something so familiar to me about Arab culture that often reminded me of my family back home in South Texas. The ways the people related to their families and friends with a loyal love as well as the values that drove how they interacted with the world reminded me so much of how I had grown up. It opened up doors for deep friendship quickly with my Arab neighbors, and I saw this as a gift from the Lord.

It was the first time after becoming a follower of Jesus that I started to question the idea that my culture was a liability in my life, one that I was supposed to abandon to the foot of the cross. What if God had made me Latina for a reason? Could it be for his glory and his purposes in the world? It was this discovery that led me to minister among Latino college students upon returning to the United States after a year of living overseas. Maybe it was time to embrace all of who I was for the sake of his mission?

With this new perspective guiding me, I immersed myself in the Latino community and learned to move toward wholeness in my ethnic identity. It was a very healing, very important time in my life. Yet things quickly turned difficult as the climate in the United States toward the Latino community started to change and the immigration issue started to show up in our ministry.

I had been ministering among Latino students on a conservative college campus and had seen the Lord grow the ministry from 10 to 150 people in just three years. As I waded deeper and deeper into my own community, the struggles of our undocumented students started to create tension and pain. Ten percent of the leadership of our ministry was undocumented—these were men and women who loved the Lord and were passionate about his work. Yet at the same time, legislation was being passed in our state that was making it increasingly difficult for them and the people in their families. The campus rhetoric had changed as well, and Latino students were the target of a lot of the frustration and angst present more broadly in society. I can remember several of our Latino student leaders participating in a “sit-in” on campus one afternoon, and as certain white students would pass by, they would yell out racist profanity. At one point a white student shouted, “They’re all pigs. We should just shoot them all.”

It wasn’t as if you could look at our friends and know their immigration status. These hateful, murderous slurs were being thrown at any brown body nearby. Again, as a light-skinned Latina, I had a choice to make. Would I continue to be a timid voice and allow this type of behavior to continue just as I had many years before? Or would I raise my voice and spend my reputation in order to be in solidarity alongside my community? Would I speak truth to power and proclaim that we as Latinos are people

made in God’s image, and it was not okay to diminish that in any way?

As a Mexican American woman leader, it was no longer an option to hide behind my light complexion. God was calling me to embrace all of who I was for the sake of his mission and for the sake of his image bearers. So that’s what I did. I became a vocal advocate for my Latino community and for the issues that affected us. I looked my undocumented Latino students in the eyes and said to them that their struggle would be my struggle, despite the cost. While I didn’t have their story, I definitely had their backs and would leverage whatever power I had to advocate for change.

I went on to utilize whatever avenues I could within the broader ministry and beyond to speak up for our people. This was risky for me, but much like Esther, I saw this as worthy of my very life. The risk also paled in comparison to what our undocumented Latino students faced. They and their families needed relief and change.

A LEADER IN GOD’S MISSION

Esther does eventually use her power for the sake of her people, embracing all of her identity in the process. I love that the book of Esther ends not only with the Jews being spared but also with her as a different person from the one we were introduced to in the first chapter. In the beginning she was a young bride who hid her Jewish identity. In the end, though, she was using her power to institute the feast of Purim. It was a feast intended to become a regular part of the rhythm of her people to remind them of how God delivered and rescued them. She had become a leader who offered God all of who she was for his purposes in the world.

ESTHER'S STORY TO YOUR STORY

What about you? In what ways might the Lord be asking you to embrace all of who you are for the sake of his mission? I believe the invitation is to take up your identity just like Esther, wherever you are on your ethnic identity journey. Maybe you are like me and have been hiding behind your ability to assimilate to the majority culture around you. For you, the call is to take the next step and begin to engage this part of yourself, believing God created you with intention and purpose in all things. Maybe you have always embraced your ethnicity, knowing it to be a gift of God. Might it also be a gift for his greater purposes? What steps can you take to offer this part of your identity to the Lord's work in and around you?

God moved in the story of Esther to rescue his chosen people in order to fulfill his plan for all of humanity. As a bicultural woman in the Bible, Esther is forever known as an important person in the unfinished narrative of God's unfolding kingdom. Who will be the multicultural Latinas that God will continue to raise up "for such a time as this" in each coming generation? May it be you. May it be me. May it be all of us together offering our brave voice to the legacy of Esther's.

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