



**I** once read a statement that greatly impacted my life and worldview: "Our greatest strength as a human race is our ability to acknowledge our differences; Our greatest weakness is our failure to embrace them."

My early development was shaped in an affluent suburban community 25 plus miles north of New York City in White Plains, New York. I was the youngest of a blended family, born to middle aged parents who, in their late forties and early fifties were surprised—or better, shocked—by the arrival of a baby girl. We lived in a community with neighbors of different ethnicities. The city's melting pot was the high school where everyone in the city attended. My best friends and neighbors were second generation American: Italian, Catholic and Jewish.

Although there were many similarities among us, I saw and heard things in their houses that I did not experience in my own home, like different music, religious and family traditions, and folklore. And yes, they saw and heard things in my home that they had not otherwise experienced.

I grew up thinking difference was good. And for me, the differences and similarities connected us all as part of a human family. We shared in a common struggle of justice, fairness, equality and the pursuit of happiness. I learned to love my neighbors even when they were different.



## No Throwaway People

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It was in The Sixties in North Carolina that I was first introduced to the Jim Crow laws of the South and the separation of its citizens into two people groups, colored and white. Blacks were denied, by law, equal access to public facilities, goods and services. The city was divided racially: black and white churches, schools, libraries, transportation, recreation, medical and eating facilities. Even restrooms and outdoor water fountains displayed "COLORED ONLY" and "WHITE ONLY" signs. I was completely ignorant of and unprepared for these unfamiliar customs and lifestyles. These multidimensional, inhumane, oppressive conditions had a profound effect on me

and helped shape my journey to address social issues and injustices from the position of courage, integrity, and love. I resolved to use my voice for good, invest in people and invest in God's Word. I was determined to be a bold uncompromising Christian repairing wounds of injustices, while challenging difficult issues in Christ-honoring ways.

I began to realize that we are engaged in a culture that wants us to think as the masses think, say what the masses say, and do what the masses do. "Sameness" can become a kind of security blanket that wraps us in the warm feeling of being acceptable to groups we identify with and whose approval we are looking for. We somehow

believe that if we don't stand out, we can't be criticized. We too often allow ourselves to become socially invisible. However, I have learned that the chameleon approach to life is neither psychologically healthy or spiritually mature.

Although we live in a society that wants conformity, we are called by Christ to be different and not to conform, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. (Romans 12:2)

At some point, we must take a stand and be who we are meant to be and who God designed us to be as individuals. If we want to be different in a world that wants conformity, then we must settle in our minds, who and Whose we are. We must embrace our design, our unique blueprint—our spirit, soul, and body.

When we do that, when we face ourselves—our limitations, our assets, liabilities, the good, the bad and the ugly—we begin to really realize just how precious we are to God. He loves us just as we are. At an early age, God gave me the opportunity to learn this and to demonstrate the nature and character of His love to those around me. Through those earliest experiences, God was teaching me the first and the greatest commandment to "love the Lord



your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind." And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39)

I learned the Christian gospel tells us that racism, classism and sexism are not from God and fundamentally exist because of sin (Galatians 3:28). Christ united Christians of every ethnicity together. He removed ethnicity as a barrier. He removed class and gender as barriers. I found that unconditional love and acceptance are contagious. But so are partiality, favoritism, prejudice, subjugating, dominating, and discriminating. The latter are not part of God's design.

If we treat a person with contempt, we are mistreating a person who is made in God's image; we are hurting somebody whom God loves and for whom Jesus died. Jesus commands us to love one another as He loves us. (John 13:34) Although we may have some different physical attributes (skin color, shapes of eyes and noses, height, weight, age, and many other factors outside our control), we are all of equal value in God's design. There are no throwaway people.

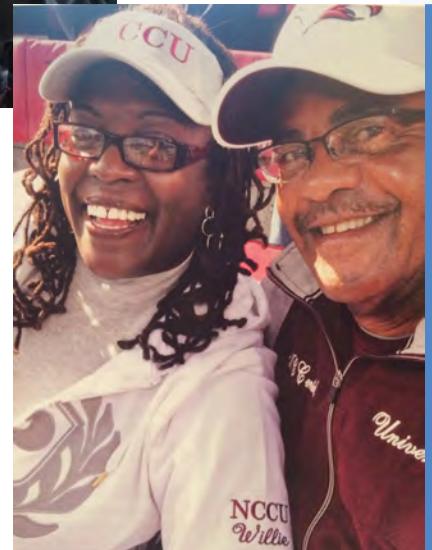
As is the case with all of God's commands, He hides a blessing in these commands for us. Accepting others stretches us beyond ourselves and beyond our limited knowledge of the confined world around us. I understand without doubt that God gifts each of us with His uniqueness and allows the presence of others to pass through our lives for the very purpose of enabling us to act like and become more like Christ. Standing firm on biblical principles, practicing unfeigned love of God, and demonstrating love for God's people—these set Christianity and Christians apart.

In addition, opening oneself up to diverse relationships provides limitless opportunities for us to learn and grow. It gives us the chance to display and spread God's unconditional love for others.

However, life is a process of growth and there are no shortcuts. Following God's commands—faith in action—is never easy. It is a continuous commitment requiring continual effort and willingness to let God take the lead in our relationships. Reaching out to those different than ourselves often takes courage and commitment.

As Christians, individually and collectively as His Church, we can no longer remain passive, especially around issues of race, gender and human rights disparities. Oppressive systems have negatively impacted generations of people of color and gender. Action steps are desperately needed primarily by the Faith community to take apart systems that uphold racial, gender and class inequities.

I've learned to be who God created me to be, stand alone, stand tall, stand up for my beliefs, determine my own plan, do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with my God (Micah 6:8). I've learned doing nothing is not an option. I'm grateful for reminders that each one of us is a work in progress—a work in process. God uses ordinary people like me and you to do extraordinary things. 



*Willie Hodges Parker, retired, earned full scholarships to Columbia University and UNC-Chapel Hill, where she graduated with a Masters Degree in Social Work. Her public service works in New York and with the NC Department of Health and Human Services earned her various recognitions and commendations, including New York Public Service Awards, the Order of the Long Leaf Pine (NC) and Westchester County NY Distinguished Citizen Proclamations. Willie and her husband Barry have been licensed, ordained Ministers since 1987. They are primarily involved in marketplace evangelism and discipleship. Willie and Barry have been members of Colonial Baptist Church, Cary NC for 23 years.*