



Listening to Immigrant Voices

Getting Out of the Box

Rev. Héctor Garfias-Toledo

*Associate to the Bishop and Director for Evangelical Mission
Metropolitan Chicago Synod, ELCA*

We all do it. We stereotype people; we tend to put people into boxes. In some way, we determine what they should look like or how they should be. I believe it gives us a sense of control over others, and it makes it easier for us to deal with the reality of diversity because it reduces our need to pay attention, to honor, and especially to learn from others.

To be honest, I have done it. Sometimes consciously, but other times unconsciously, which is of concern because in most cases we realize we have done it after we have put people into boxes.

I was born in Mexico. I have two younger siblings. My parents have worked since they were teenagers and raised my siblings and myself. They taught us to be respectful, responsible, dependable, reliable, punctual, and also inculcated in us the Christian faith, the faith that gave them strength and hope.

In Mexico, we were members of a Lutheran congregation that was established by the first Lutheran missionaries trained by the American Lutheran Church in Texas. Being a Lutheran was never easy in Mexico because Lutherans were stereotyped as the enemies of the dominant Roman Catholic Church in Mexico. Seemingly, Lutherans stereotyped Roman Catholics as non-Christians. Differences made us put each other into boxes.

The Holy Spirit, I believe, decided that it was time for me to take a different role in the church and in the world. I had a leadership role in the congregation. I talked to my pastor and after a few months he connected me with a professor at the seminary in Austin, Texas. That was the beginning of my journey as an immigrant.

My story as an immigrant is different from other stories, because the reason I came to the United States was not that I was fleeing from violence, nor was I looking for the great American Dream. The first time I came to the United States I came as an international student who would go back to Mexico as a pastor. The second time I came was in response to an invitation to be a mission developer in the Chicago area. I came to be a missionary supporting the ministry of the ELCA. The main driving force was the desire to faithfully serve the people of God.

Once in the United States I had to learn a new and different lifestyle. It was different from my experience in Texas and in Mexico. As a pastor, I had to serve people who had crossed the border for different reasons than mine. I heard numerous stories from people in the congregations who had left their country to

For people in both communities, Latino and Anglo, a Mexican Lutheran was an abnormal thing. For many people, to be Mexican means to be Roman Catholic. Again, I did not fit in the box. So, I was what I called a “double-boxed person,” for people wanted to put me in two different kinds of boxes.

come to this land to work. Each story was heartbreaking. For instance, a man once told me that he was in a truck for hours under a load of soil and plants. Dirt from the pots was falling into his eyes; it was hot and there was no air circulation. He thought that was his last day of life.

I had to cope with a new and different challenge, being put into a box. I am not the typical type of Mexican. I do not look like many people believe Mexicans should look. I am married to a wonderful Taiwanese woman who happens not to be the stereotypical type of Taiwanese woman, and we have a daughter who is, as she describes it, “a hybrid kid.” I remember those days when we were just married. We were a “different” type of couple. It was not very common to see a Mexican and a Taiwanese together. For some, I know, we were kind of strange, for others we were the unusual couple, and as someone once told us we were “a cute couple.” Again, we did not fit in the box of the “regular” traditional immigrants.

In addition, I was Lutheran. For people in both communities, Latino and Anglo, a Mexican Lutheran was an abnormal thing. For many people, to be Mexican means to be Roman Catholic. Again, I did not fit in the box. So, I was what I called a “double-boxed person,” for people wanted to put me in two different kinds of boxes.

The stereotypes of a Mexican did not necessarily fit me. As a result, some people had a hard time. In very subtle ways, some people implied that I could not be different from what they wanted

me to be. Mexicans are lazy, non-punctual, needy people from south of the border. Some could not believe I was not Roman Catholic. People made assumptions before we could get to know each other.

Political, economic, and cultural dominance determines how people should be seen or expected to be, which leads to boxing people. Is that not what we do when we want to bring order? We put away stuff. We hide it because it makes our space messy? There also is a deeper level of this issue which is painful, since it damages and hurts the dignity of immigrants. It is common to see immigrants as needy, the ones who have to be helped, the ones who have to be rescued, and the objects of charity from the dominant culture. Such attitudes give the dominant culture a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment, making immigrants recipients of charity and trophies of their philanthropy. Such patterns prevent the dominant culture from seeing the immigrant population as valuable, talented, and gifted people, who can generate and provide assets that contribute to the entire community. Immigrants, then, become a token, the color of the organization.

In my experience, when immigrants do not conform to such stereotypes or such predetermined boxes, we are not appreciated. On the contrary, we become a threat to a paternalistic system.

I strongly want to point out that I am speaking of my experience in a general way. In the same way that I have experienced what I have described above, I have been blessed by an uncountable number of people who have embraced the immigrant community. They are individuals, groups, and organizations in the United States that intentionally seek to dismantle this paternalistic system. And I have had the blessing to meet many people who genuinely provided support, help, and care. My question is, what will it take for the majority in any nation to be able to see the gift and the richness in others, before we put people into boxes?

These issues are as old as humanity. I believe that I may not see it solved in my lifetime, but also believe that we cannot remain indifferent to the issue. This is also God's concern.

Jesus as our hope teaches us through his life, death, and resurrection that he is the source of life, who can give us the

What will it take for the majority
in any nation to be able to see
the gift and the richness in others,
before we put people into boxes?

will, desire, and strength to overcome such "boxing behaviors." He himself experienced the judgement of people who wanted to put him into a box. They wanted him to be the way that they wanted, and they wanted to put him in a box so that they could control him. But, not even the box of death could hold him back. He came out alive so that no one will die in a box, and no one will put others into boxes. That is the promise and the hope that gave my parents strength. The same hope has helped me to face today and tomorrow.

I have been in this country for almost twenty years. To this day, I still get up each day wondering what box I will be in, and how I will walk away from trying to put others into boxes. I ask for wisdom to lead others to seek the strength to respond faithfully to the Lord's call, standing firm in the promise that God has given us in Jesus Christ. Every day I pray that others and I will be able to see ourselves as children of God who happened to be born in another part or the world that God created for all, and to remember that in most cases our actions in other countries will cause other people to leave their countries seeking a place where they can live.

As I continue walking this journey I earnestly ask God to enlighten me and strengthen me with God's Spirit so that she will help me to remember and remind others that I am a child of God who happened to be born in Mexico, who happened to be raised in the Lutheran tradition, who happens to be a little bit different from the rest of my brothers and sisters in Mexico, who happens to see things in different ways, and who is neither better nor worse (or less) than anybody else in this country or in the world.