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# E-QUALITY



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## **MORE THAN SERVING TEA: One Asian Woman's Journey to the Real Jesus**

By Nikki Toyama-Szeto

Recently, I've been trying to picture Jesus. Really picture him. Not just slide into a lazy picture of the Jesus in countless religious storefronts on Mission Street. Moving beyond a plump, fed on mac-and-cheese Jesus, I ask him, "Do you know what it's like to be me? Do you know what it's like to be Japanese American? And if you do, do you have any changes you'd like to make regarding your commands?" I ask because I find some of Jesus' words hard and culturally insensitive. Did the command to leave family and fields for the sake of the gospel refer to Asian families, too? Does the suggestion to serve others and take the lowest spot apply when it seems that we often start with the lowest seat—or no seat—at the table?



For the past few months I've been on a search for a Japanese Jesus. Does the Japanese Jesus have thick black hair, with brushed-aside bangs like the sansei guys I know? Does his face crinkle and the browns of his eyes disappear when he laughs? Does he eat rice with his dinner and play basketball with the church league?

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I know you're not supposed to make God into your own image. But I desperately needed to know that Jesus knew what it was like to be me, a Japanese American woman. Were my gender and my ethnicity just obstacles to overcome in my relationship with him?

### **Becoming "Asian"**

Shortly after college, I realized I was Asian. I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where my friend Grace quickly informed me that I was Japanese American. She had been working with Asian college students on the East Coast with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship who were trying to understand how their culture affected their relationship with God. "You're so Japanese-y" she said, referring to my tendency to make everything beautiful. "Really?" I asked, as I primped the calla lilies one last time, creating a perfect fan.

Technically I knew that I was Asian. Well, I knew I was different, and that difference was called "Asian." In first grade, I was eating dinner at my best friend's house, my first meal outside my home. Laurie's mother

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didn't cook; she re-heated. And I could never understand why their kitchen was always so clean—it lacked the steaming pots, the bubbling bowls, and the pungent smells of curry, takuan, or stinky tofu. My best friend Laurie laughed out loud when I brought the soup bowl to my mouth. Embarrassed, I stopped drinking the broth from the bowl directly. Apparently you don't slurp the last bits in show of your appreciation of the meal. I tucked this lesson into my heart.

My ethnicity was embarrassing, so I cut out all cultural elements from the life I lived outside my home. I wanted to prove that I was no different from any of my other friends, and I worked hard to fit in, even if something about it didn't feel quite right in my skin.

In this way, I became a follower of Jesus. A follower of Jesus without the color, tastes, and textures of my female Japanese-ness. A genderless and raceless follower of Jesus.

### **Embracing Culture and Gender**

Embracing my race and gender did not come to me easily. It did not arrive as a neatly wrapped package with a user's manual. It arrived as a series of hiccups that came and went as it pleased. I discovered what it meant to be a woman and a Japanese American as I ventured across cultures.

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This voluntary displacement, putting myself in uncomfortable places, made the racial and gender dynamics pop out in clear colors. The politically correct environment in the United States did not allow for a lot of mistakes or gritty conversation. But my work with college students took me to a variety of different places. I took a group of students on a poverty immersion into the slums of Nairobi, the garbage villages of Cairo, and the red-light districts of Bangkok.

In Kenya, I learned that Asian is treated very differently from "black" and "white" folks. The racial and power stratification in the country showed me that race had power. The legacy of British colonization had left a strong power dynamic along racial lines. In Cairo, I felt what it was like to be in a society where men and women have very strict roles. My friendly hello didn't go over well with the men at the tea shop. And in Bangkok, both my race and gender combined. I saw the exploitation of Asian women, commoditized for visitors of every country. Thai women entertained men from Japan, Germany, and the U.S. in bars and night clubs. Everywhere, women were for sale to the highest foreign bidder.

### **Jesus' Culture**

I discovered how my gender and my race affect so many areas of my life—how people treat me, how they perceive me, how I perceive my role, my communication, and my faith. At this time, Jesus' life and culture began to come alive in the Scriptures. As I learned to recognize the cultural pushes and pulls of my life, I saw with greater clarity the pushes and pulls of his life. And in this, I found a connection to a man so different from myself. I watched his reaction as his mother urged him to fix a wine problem at a friend's wedding. His resistance to his "pushy" mother feels familiar and so does his compliance to her request. The strong hospitality culture that pervades the gospel stories reminds me of the Asian women I've met in church. Food accompanies every event and honoring guests is a supreme responsibility. I journeyed with Jesus as he ventured into so many homes—Simon the Pharisee, Zacchaeus the tax collector, Mary and Martha, Simon's mother-in-law. I understood Martha's indignation when Mary refused to help and instead

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sat at Jesus' feet. I felt Simon's shame as a woman of ill-repute sneaks into his elite gathering and pours perfume on Jesus' feet.

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And even the elements that feel foreign, like the command to leave fields, fathers, mothers, in order to follow the gospel, came more alive as I could identify why they rubbed me more than my non-Asian friends around me. I thought of my Korean friend, whose parents worked extra hard so that he could attend a private elite college. They forfeited saving for their own retirement so that he could go to school. Putting their hopes in his ability to get a high paying job and take care of them, he was their retirement plan. As he continued to try to follow Jesus, he wrestled with honoring his parents' sacrifice and putting the kingdom of God first. My Asian friends and I struggled, without the luxury of the "independent at 18" badge that many of my other friends proudly wore. Off they went to worlds unknown, championing the gospel. And we stayed home, left with a complicated scenario. No wonder people said that we were indecisive.

If Jesus had come in a gender-less and race-less form, I would find it hard to relate to him. He is more accessible to me as a Jewish man, even though his gender and race are so different from my own. As I learned more about the Jewish context that Jesus entered, it became even easier to understand. He navigated a Jewish family structure. He had obligations to his community.

### **Not Obstacles But Gifts**

A few years after my journey of discovery, I began to love the different aspects of being an Asian woman. What had once been a liability that I tried to transcend, I now wanted to investigate and explore. I looked for ways that Asians, especially women, brought unique contributions to leadership and helpful correctives to the independent "do it yourself" attitude I saw prevalent around me. I collected stories of gifted Asian women evangelists who seemed to be the antithesis of the pushy open air preachers I saw. I put up posters of justice workers, Asian women who marched, rallied, organized, and yelled to bring attention to the issues of the marginalized. And I sat at the feet of Asian women preachers who unfolded the truths of God in profound, indirect, holistic stories. In their words, I found my way home. In their words, I found the Japanese American Jesus, the Jewish Jesus, and the Jesus of all humanity.

I began to realize that my gender and my ethnicity were not obstacles to be overcome but gifts, chosen by God so that I might know him better. They weren't an after-thought but a grace he had given to me. My gender and my ethnicity continually lead me to a deeper understanding of Jesus. And his call to me is, "Even so...come follow me." So I bring who I am and follow him. I bring my experiences as a Japanese American woman to my discipleship. I bring my experiences as a person who tried to transcend gender and race. And I bring my experiences as a woman who is slowly beginning to understand what it means to steward well this great gift of being "female" and "Japanese American." Of being "fearfully" and "wonderfully" made.

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