

OUR HISPANIC NEIGHBORS

TEXT: Matthew 25:35-40

Each year, from September 15 to October 15, people from all different backgrounds and nationalities come together to celebrate Hispanic-Latino Heritage Month. This has not always been one of the special events on the United Methodist calendar, but it's time to change that. We have so much to share with our Hispanic/Latino brothers and sisters. So today is fiesta time.

Hispanic Heritage Month is a celebration of the histories, cultures and contributions of American citizens whose ancestors came from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. The celebration can trace its history all the way back to 1968, when President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed that September 15 would be the beginning of Hispanic Heritage Week. Through the signing of Proclamation 3869 on September 17, 1968, he brought attention to the many outstanding improvements that people of Hispanic descent have contributed to the United States national heritage, through areas such as our national culture, business, science, and military service.

September 15 is not an insignificant date for those of Hispanic descent. It is the anniversary of independence for many Latin American countries including Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Mexico and Chile also celebrate their independence days on Sept. 16 and Sept. 18, respectively.

But the Hispanic presence in this country goes back even before the first settlers came. San Miguel de Guadalupe was the first European settlement in North America. It was founded in Georgia in 1526, 8 years before Jamestown. St. Augustine, Florida, was founded in 1565 and is the oldest city in the United States. Hispanic Americans have been making contributions to life in the United States ever since.

Here are some of the events and people of Hispanic/Latino origin, who have made a difference in the growth of the United States:

In 1781, a group of Spaniards, Afro-Latinos, indigenous people and mestizos set out from colonial-era Mexico, traveled into California and founded the city of Los Angeles. As of July 2014 Los Angeles is the city with the country's largest Hispanic population at nearly 5 million.

Poet, revolutionary and Cuban nationalist Jose Marti spent four years in New York City, where he wrote for both English and Spanish-language newspapers, developing ideas that would influence his thinking about the often tense relationship between the U.S. and Latin America. Marti was one of Latin America's greatest intellectuals, earning him a statue in front of Central Park in Manhattan.

Before *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the courts ruled it unconstitutional to segregate students of Mexican heritage into inferior schools. The plaintiff, Sylvia Mendez, sued after being turned away from a "whites only" public school in California. In 1947 a decision from the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals helped pave the way for the nation's school desegregation

At the end of World War II, the body of Private Felix Longoria was returned to his hometown in Texas, where the director of the funeral home forbade the family from using the chapel because he feared white residents would disapprove. The G.I. Forum, a civil rights organization led by Hector P. Garcia, organized a campaign that caught the attention of then U.S. Senator Lyndon Johnson. He arranged for Longoria to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery, repudiating anti-Mexican-American sentiment. This action stands as a milestone in the march toward the guarantee of Latinos' civil rights.

In 1965, Filipino and Latino farmworker unions joined in a strike, and later a boycott of grapes in the Delano area of California to protest poor conditions. The five-year campaign ultimately succeeded in forcing the grape producers to sign union contracts. This early victory helped secure the place of the United Farm Workers and its leader Cesar Chavez, all of whom were key players in the Latino civil rights movement.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed an immigration reform into law that legalized the status of some 3 million people, showing that passing comprehensive immigration legislation is possible. In 2015 Latinos became the largest ethnic group in the state of California, overtaking non-Hispanic whites.

Latinos constantly deal with the misperception that they're somehow more foreign than the other immigrant-descended people who live here. In fact, about two-thirds of U.S. Hispanics were born in this country. In places like California or New Mexico, where Latinos are the largest ethnic group, it's become increasingly impossible to deny that Latinos are as American as everyone else.

Today we have a Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, a candidate for President of the United States Julian Castro, an award-winning actress and dancer Rita Moreno, world's most widely-read author Chilean Isabel Allende, A-Rod and a myriad of other sports celebrates. Latinos are found in all walks of life in the United States and they are contributing to the success of our nation.

And they are changing the face of the church as well. Traditionally members of the Catholic Church, Hispanic/Latino brothers and sisters are bringing their faith - and their rhythms - to Protestant denominations. From the Pentecostal Assemblies of God to the socially conscious Unitarian Universalists, the Latinos are not only changing where and how they worship, they are also beginning to affect the larger Christian faith. As we sing some hymns this morning that may not all be familiar to us, we can feel the Latin rhythms, and Rose is helping us by adding the Spanish words to these hymns. Most of these started as Latino hymns, and the English words came later.

The United Methodist Church has a long history of inclusion of the Hispanic/Latino population. Rev. Lyda Pierce recently retired after a career as a UMC missionary for Hispanic/Latino Ministry Development. Her successor is Rev. Cruz Edwin Santos, a native of Puerto Rico, who will work collaboratively in developing and

implementing a fresh approach to Hispanic and Latino Ministries across the Pacific Northwest.

In recent years, our Hispanic brothers and sisters, our Hispanic neighbors, have faced increasing pushback in their desire, and often their humanitarian need to move across our southern border. They face poverty and violence in their home countries and look for a new life of safety and freedom in our country. While no one can ignore the fact that some bring violence and drugs with them, most of them are seeking a new life in a land where there are options for success and assimilation into life here. These are our Hispanic neighbors. They bring their heritage, their ethos, their love of life, good food, and religious heritage that adds color, rhythm and spice to our country, our neighborhoods and our churches. Let us be the church that welcomes all folks, of every color, language and history into the body of Christ. As Christians we are to recognize the stranger in our midst. We are to feed, clothe and care for those in need, in the name of our Christ. In These days of uncertainty, we come together today at the table of the Lord, welcoming all into the fellowship of Christ. As we honor our Hispanic neighbors , let us be one in Christ and one in service to all of God's children. Amen.