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**Annie:** Hi friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host, Annie F. Downs. It's a really special week here on the podcast. I cannot wait for you to hear it.

Before we dive into today's conversation, a word from one of our amazing sponsors, [BetterHelp](#). I don't know about you but sometimes it's easier for me to focus on the problems that are rearing their ugly heads than actually solving the problems. I think it's part of human nature but we can also probably agree that it's not the most constructive approach. I mean, the only way out is through, right?

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And if you're not sure you got that whole URL, no worries. All the links to our sponsors, the transcript of the show, and even a place to sign up to get an email from me every Friday, the AFD Week in Review, those are all in the show notes below.

**Intro:** This week on the show, I'm passing the microphone over to my good friend, Pastor Mike Kelsey. Y'all know and love him already. He's been on the show. He joined us at our TSF Tour Live show in Grand Rapids in 2021 and he's hosted the show for a whole week the last couple of years.

He's a lead pastor of preaching and culture at McLean Bible Church just outside of Washington, DC. And it's Mike's passion to advance the gospel in multi-ethnic contexts that make him such a trusted voice and leading and teaching me about what racial justice looks like.

And honestly, I think it's a really humble, generous gift that he and his guests would invite us to continue learning about racial reconciliation through the unique opportunity of getting to hear conversations between people of all races without me in the room.

So I asked Mike if he would host a week of shows for us again, and he so graciously agreed. I can't wait for you to hear these two episodes this week. You guys, because listen to how Mike asked to build these episodes as conversations with friends about the Asian American experience in regards to racism. Y'all, talk about using his power to amplify and advocate for the voices of others. I'm so inspired by Mike.

I cannot wait for you to hear from his guests this week. Today he's talking with Helen Lee. Helen has been in Christian publishing since 1993. She's done work everywhere from Christianity Today to Leadership Journal, to InterVarsity Press, and pretty much everywhere in between.

Her authoring and co-authoring credits include *The Race-Wise Family*, *The Missional Mom*, *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*, and she's the co-founder of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. And we are such fans of their work. In fact, we got to meet several of their team members out on tour earlier this year. It was awesome. I love what they do.

Mike and Helen talk about her experience growing up Asian in a predominantly white community, how Asian Americans often feel in conversations about race, and y'all are gonna love this part, the process of writing and publishing and how aspiring writers can work on their craft. Y'all are going to love her and this conversation. So here's our host, Pastor Mike Kelsey, and his conversation with Helen Lee.

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**Mike:** Well, Helen Lee, I've already told you I'm a fan out for a moment. I'll explain why in a minute. But I'm super excited to have you on the podcast.

**Helen:** Thanks, Pastor Mike. It's an honor to be here with you today.

**Mike:** I want to catch our listeners out for them before we dive in. I have been and had the privilege really of hosting a few episodes for Annie. And I always say this every time I'm here: I don't know why she keeps doing this.

But typically, I've been trying to be a helpful tour guide for people to maybe understand a bit more of the African American experience, what are some of the challenges, the tensions that black Christians, in particular, are walking through, and how people can grow in relationship and empathy and awareness and justice and all that.

Alongside that, I've been on my own journey and that has been... I have to push people all the time to grow. Like ignorance is never an excuse, right? So we have the opportunity, especially in 2022 to learn. We have more access than any generation ever.

**Helen:** For sure.

**Mike:** Well, here's the thing. That's true for me too. So I wanted to devote these episodes to exploring the Asian American experience because I've been on a journey through some really helpful just friendships, but also in my pastoral ministry.

So as I was kind of looking and thinking and processing who would I want to interview, I stumbled across your name and started just reading some of your stuff, reading your book, *The Race-Wise Family*, which is just so helpful for parents who are trying to help their children navigate these issues and grow in just empathy and compassion and education and wisdom and just the facility of being able to navigate these issues. So that's been helpful to me. And then I realized you are the author of a book I bought my wife a couple years ago.

**Helen:** Probably like 10 years ago.

**Mike:** *The Missional Mom*. So you've been in the game for a while. So I'm excited to get to talk to you about writing and publishing because of what you do professionally with InterVarsity Press but I'm also really excited to learn more from your journey as a Korean American woman.

I want to dive right into a bit of a sensitive question but one that you gave me permission to ask. Let me just say that. When I first reached out to you, we had never interacted, never met. I just emailed you cold. And I was like, "I don't know if she's even going to respond to my email."

And when you responded, you were a bit cautious, I would say, about coming on and being interviewed. Well, I was gonna say, I'm curious to know why but I know because we've talked about it. But I think it'd be helpful for some of our listeners to understand where was that caution coming from for you.

**Helen:** Well, I was super honored to be asked for sure. Of course, I know Annie Downs by name. I haven't met her. Hopefully, that day will come. And I appreciate a lot about her ministry, and I'm sure about the listeners who appreciate this podcast.

But I think if you're a person of color entering into what you imagine to be a largely whitespace, largely white listenership, I could be wrong about that, so I am making some assumptions here, you always have to enter those spaces with some of your guard up, with a little bit of trepidation because there's a wide range of groups of white Christians, some of whom are not always as welcoming to those of us who are people of color, some who are even hostile at times for various reasons depending on the kinds of topics we're talking about.

So I felt like I needed to know more. I couldn't just say yes all in. And partly because when I think about the topics we are likely going to talk about today, we're going to talk about issues of race and ethnicity and things like that, which are not always considered fun topics.

Like I love talking about them. I think they're super important. I think they're super valuable for all of us, whether we're people of color or not, in the church to be aware of and thinking about. But it might not jive with That Sounds Fun kind of vibe. So that also gave me a little bit of pause, like, "How are we going to have these conversations in a way that somehow fits the vibe of the podcast?"

So anyway, I had questions. I had questions. But you were really patient and you were really thoughtful in the way you helped reassure me and the way you talked about how listeners had been responding to you with your past episodes with other guests of color. And that was really reassuring. I think when you hear from another person of color that a space is a safe space, that helps a lot. So that was really reassuring for me. And so yes, here I am.

**Mike:** And I appreciate you sharing that. You know, I consider myself now... I'm kind of a part of the That Sounds Fun family. I'm not on their staff or anything like that, but I'm just claiming it. And I've been so blessed—and I shared this with you—even being able to be on the That Sounds Fun tour and get to actually interact face to face with some of the people that have listened to some of these episodes, it's been a huge blessing.

But—and Annie knows this. And I'll brag on her in a moment—but when we first met, and then, you know, a little less than a year later she invited me to come on the podcast for the first time, I had the same caution. And she knows this. I had to ask around. You know, I had to ask some friends that knew her that I trusted. And I had one of my boys say, "Annie, is a real one." And for him to say that was huge for me. And so I've been able to confirm that.

But I wanted listeners to hear that because what you just shared is a very common strategic move as a person of color, where we do find ourselves having to vet these invitations and opportunities that are offered to us.

Part of the reason why I wanted to interview you and wanted to talk about the experience of Asian Americans in our country but also in our church is because in the same ways that I've been trying to help folks understand, particularly in predominantly white spaces, understand the experience of African Americans, I think it is very helpful and necessary to discipline ourselves to listen to, with humility, not just immediately in order to critique or to defend, but to listen in order to genuinely learn and even to be changed.

And I've tried to, sometimes I've done better than at other times, I've tried to put myself in that posture with Asian American sisters and brothers that have invited me into their life and have been willing to process that with me.

From your perspective, why do you think this is such an important topic? And specifically, I would say, you know, in terms of the Asian American experience, I know we can talk about race in general but why would you say this is important for folks to listen into?

**Helen:** When I think about the beautiful picture in Revelation 7, it's this amazing, amazing vision of peoples from all nations, tribes, tongues, ethnicities, all worshiping God together. That's our future, right? Which is so reassuring, so wonderful. I love that God cares so much to paint that beautiful, multiethnic picture at the end of time.

But we the church are called to bring heaven to earth, right? That's part of our call. That's part of our mission. As His followers on earth, you don't have to wait for Revelation 7. That will be this amazing picture. But I think part of our calling as Christians is to try to pursue that reality, in the here and now try to pursue ethnic and racial understanding and peace and reconciliation.

So to understand, I think, the Asian American experience, it means that you care about God's family and all its fullness, and you recognize, if for example, you might have a lack of understanding of Asian American issues, lack of relationship with other Asian American brothers and sisters, if you notice that in your own life, I think that you have an opportunity to try to start making some changes in your own personal context that will hopefully benefit not just yourself, yourself, your family, your church, your community.

And that's all, again, pointing towards our call is Christians to reach for that Revelation 7 vision now, because I think it has a tremendous witness for what we

can do in the world. This is just my bottom line bias is that no one but the church, because we have Jesus, can truly understand and reflect a reconciled community.

I mean, there are a lot of secular spaces that are talking about race, there are a lot of people who are talking about race. But if you don't have the cross in the middle of that conversation, there cannot be true and full reconciliation, right? So that's something we have to offer in the church.

And that means you have to try to start understanding all of the members of your family, your spiritual family from all different kinds of ethnic and racial backgrounds. It's part of our witness.

I mean, to be completely frank, it's also where the US is going. I mean, this is pure demographic reality. This is not the reason we do this but it's certainly something to keep in mind. I was looking at the last census numbers and Asian American community has grown the most of all different categories of demographic groups in the country from 20... I guess it was 2010 to 2020. We're talking about an 80% increase in the number of people.

**Mike:** Wow.

**Helen:** It was the fastest-growing ethnic and racial group in the US. So this is a community that is growing and will be continuing to be a larger and larger part of the church. So we want to know and serve and be hospitable to our family members in the church who are of a different ethnic background. It's important for us to just keep that in mind as we're thinking about how to learn and grow in our own relationships and our own understanding.

**Mike:** That's so good. Now, for the person that's listening who maybe they're not a Christian, they don't have a Christian background, help us understand a bit when you talk about the cross at the center of this reconciling community, what is it about the cross, the work of Jesus that lays the foundation for this? How is the Christian vision of a reconciled community different or unique?

**Helen:** So we believe in a Christ who sacrificed His life on our behalf, who laid down His life to save all of us so that we could be in relationship, in right relationship with the God of the universe. That's kind of the core gospel message is a message of reconciliation.

It is through our belief in our trust and our dedication and devotion to Jesus, our decision to follow Him as our Savior and Lord that we become reconciled to God, in the spirit of understanding that Jesus gave it all, gave His life, we believe He died on that cross to save each and every one of us.

And by doing so then, by our understanding of that, embracing that, asking for forgiveness for our sins, and asking Jesus to be the one to be the Lord of our lives, we become reconciled to God. And by so doing, that opens up a new understanding of how we are to be reconciled to one another. There's love at the center that Jesus did that, paid it all, paid for our sins because of His love for us. God sent His Son because of His love for us.

And as we embrace that core concept of love, that gives us the strength then to be reconciled to others in that spirit of love. It doesn't matter if people don't love us back, it doesn't matter if they misunderstand us or if they even hate us. Love and that desire and that willingness we have to sacrifice our own personal preferences, our own anything, on our own that we might want to hold on to, if we are willing to let it go and say, God uses us as instruments of love."

And this is very much what Martin Luther King Jr. did in all of his messages was about the power of love. Not violence, not hate, but love. How powerful that is as a reconciling force! That's what we as Christians are called to do.

And if we can show that, if we can start to more effectively and truly and sincerely show that we are driven by the love of Christ in all that we do, I've got to believe that makes an impact on the world around us. That shows that this is real. It's not just some fluff that we say to get into heaven as life insurance. It has an impact on how we relate to one another and how we relate to the culture around us.

**Mike:** That's so good. One of my... not concerns, but I think it's a healthy caution, diversity is trendy right now and in a lot of good ways. But I think, and this is would be a challenge, particularly to Christians to say, if our commitment to diversity and equity and reconciliation and justice, if it's not rooted in something deeper than a cultural trend, then we'll just repeat some of the mistakes that we've seen in the past.

Right now we have the wind at our backs in some ways in culture. Maybe not always in the evangelical church, but we have the wind at our backs in culture because it's a very compatible commitment, you know, that we want to be more inclusive we want... But if we ever find ourselves in another culture or another cultural moment where that is not as convenient or advantageous or celebrated, what is our motivation for doing the hard work of reconciliation and justice? I appreciate you walking us through that. I want to back up a little bit to talk about your personal journey.

**Helen:** Sure.

**Mike:** This was one of the reasons I was just so excited to interview you. Because I've listened to some of your story I've heard you talk about it. I'd love for you to share—and I guess I put it this way—when did you first realize you were Asian? And I put that in quotes because what I mean is kind of according to the American kind of racial conception of Asians. When did you first realize you fit somewhere in that?

**Helen:** I'll tell a little bit of my backstory to say I was born in the US. So I am a natural-born American citizen. When I was a kid I would say that a lot. I would say, "Hey, I can be President of the United States. I was born here." I think that was my juvenile, youthful way of saying to those around me, "I'm from here. I am an American just like you are" because there was something in me that recognized that sometimes people looked at me and didn't assume that, they didn't assume I was American. They assumed I was from somewhere else. And we can talk about that a little more down the road.

But I grew up in a family where both my parents were immigrants. I'm a second generation Korean American. My dad immigrated... He actually grew up in Pyongyang, which became the capital of North Korea, and was a refugee during the Korean War and emigrated eventually to the US as a grad student. My mom separately immigrated from South Korea. And they met on a blind date and got married and had me. So anyway, I'm second generation Korean American.

So I knew I'm Korean because both my parents are Korean. We would eat Korean food and observe various Korean cultural customs. But there was a pivotal moment for me in sixth grade. This is one of those indelible moments where I just can never forget.

I was in a classroom, I'm the only person of color in this classroom. So only Asian American, only person of color, only student of color. And we were filling out a form, I don't know what it was for but one of those typical forms. And the teacher just stopped all of a sudden in the beginning of our process of doing this, and she said, "Now, everybody in this class, you all will check that box that says white on the form. But you Helen, you're gonna check that box that says Asian."

I just remember feeling just sudden and shocking shame. Like everybody turned around to stare at me, all the other kids in the class just started staring at me. And they looked at me as if I was like an alien, you know, I was something other... They looked at me as if something was wrong with me. And it became just crystallized in that moment that I was different. I probably knew on an intuitive level that I was different but something about the way that that was showcased in a way that felt very shaming that I became embarrassed about my racial identity.



So that was the beginning of a very long journey, actually, for me to finally get to a point on the other side where I can say now today, you know, I don't feel that way. I feel a great appreciation to God for my ethnic heritage. But that has been a journey that took many, many years to overcome from that particular incident.

**Mike:** Wow. So then where did you go from there? I mean, you had that moment of shaming, and I heard you highlight, I don't know if that was that for you... Well, you kind of had the instinct that you were different but that was maybe the first moment where that was just so evident. I'm just in my mind picturing you in a classroom now with everybody turned and looking at you. What did you do with that moment like moving forward from there?

**Helen:** There was a beginning of a rejection for me of my own cultural heritage. I would say things like... I would tell my parents that "I don't want to ever marry someone Korean." Anything that was Korean, I didn't want anything to do with.

**Mike:** Interesting.

**Helen:** You know, we would set the table for dinner to eat our dinner together as a family, and everyone else would use chopsticks and I would always put a fork down. I would like reject the chopsticks even because it was another like symbol of my Asianness.

I would move through year after year from that point on and notice every single time I was the only Asian American or the only person of color. I experienced some racial taunting and bullying through my adolescent years, which made it even more important for me to like stay distant, you know, from my ethnic and cultural heritage. Because it was a source of pain, it was a source of a reminder that I don't fit in, that this world doesn't want me around, or this particular context doesn't want me around.

So all I could do was try to minimize it, try to figure out a way to blend in or assimilate essentially, is I think what I was trying to do from that point on for many, many years. And it wasn't until I got to college, where I started meeting some Christian Asian Americans who were so healing for me because they were able to demonstrate that their faith led them to understand God is a God who had gifted me with my ethnic heritage.

It wasn't like a random, fatalistic kind of a choice that I just happen to get the bad luck of being Korean. It wasn't that. It was God's gift to me. It was God's blessing on me. And learning that truth it just changed my relationship with God. It just changed my conception of who I was. It was huge for me.

I think that didn't happen till my senior year in college-

**Mike:** Wow.

**Helen:** So we're talking about from sixth grade all the way through my senior year in college I had this understanding of who I was that wasn't accurate, that I was somehow doomed because I was an Asian person in the US. It took me a while to get to the point where I could embrace this is God's gift to me and I'm fortunate.

We all should be grateful and all should feel grateful for who God has made us to be. But sometimes living and moving through our world here in the US, and particularly in the US context, people of color don't always feel that way. So we have to battle that tension of like leaning into the truth of God's gift to us and the gift of ethnicity and somehow rejecting the lies that Satan is trying to play, the lies that society is trying to give us, that we don't matter or we're less than or not as valuable as someone who is white or in the dominant culture.

**Mike:** Well, first of all, you mentioned you put the chopsticks down and pick up the fork. I did get a sigh of relief, because I'm like, I do that too. I put the chopsticks down because I'm like, I cannot, no matter how many tutorials I get, I have not been able to master it. And I'm trying.

But let me ask you this. Did that period of time where you were, you said, minimizing your kind of Koreanness, did that create any tension between you and your parents? Like, how did they navigate that? Or didn't even see that you were trying to do that?

**Helen:** I think that the reality of growing up in an immigrant household is that my parents just were super, super busy and didn't necessarily engage in conversation with me. And this is one of the things in hindsight I wish we had talked about it more. Maybe they could have helped me with some of that healing journey. For the most part, they just kind of laughed it off. Like, Okay, she's saying this now. When she gets older, it'll be different.

And it's funny because ironically, I did end up marrying a Korean Canadian. So I did stay true to my promise not to marry a Korean American. But I married a Korean North American instead. But in any case, I know for a number of my friends, however, who were Korean, who felt similarly, they didn't necessarily want to marry someone in the same cultural context. That provokes so much familial tension. I mean, lots and lots of heartbreak and heartache.

So it's certainly that whole piece of trying to reconcile your own ethnic identity, coming to terms with it, maybe rejecting it within your particular family context.

It's a huge area of potential heartbreak, a lot of heartache for a lot of people that I know.

So I know it probably worried them, you know, and I think that it probably hurt them on some level that it felt like I was rejecting them in a way. As a kid, I wasn't attuned enough to those dynamics to fully understand it. So much in Asian culture, I think is unspoken. There's kind of an implicitness.

There's like a mentality that if you are doing the right thing you won't get into any conflicts because you're ascertaining the situation, you're understanding everyone's feelings. And so there should never be conflict if you're doing the right thing. But of course, that's very different from your typical western way of thinking of we're going to have conflict because we're different. And that's not an Asian way of thinking at all.

I use these terms broadly knowing that there are differences and distinctions among various Asian cultures and ethnicities. But that was true for me where we didn't necessarily always talk about these things explicitly. But I've got to believe that it probably caused some heartache for my parents to hear me talk in this way.

**Mike:** Well, you brought something up that I want to come back to in a minute about the differences even within the Asian American community because quite frankly I think that's one of the biggest kind of growth curves.

For those of us that are non-Asian, we tend to I think look at Asian Americans part of the racial construct that's been kind of created in our country where we just kind of lump all... whatever we mean by Asian you know, people together and assume the same culture, same values, even same, you know, physical features. We just lump everybody in. So I would love for you to help me with that.

[00:29:13] <music>

**Sponsor:** Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our amazing partners, [Liquid I.V.](#) You know I love a good routine, especially in the morning, some reading and journaling time, my skincare regimen while listening to a podcast or two, tea time. These are the things that are making up my day that is headed in the right direction.

But we've got to make sure we're addressing one of the most important aspects of our daily health hydration, you guys. Now that the weather is getting colder, signs of dehydration are harder to notice. We're not sweating as much or feeling overheated, but that doesn't mean we don't need to pay attention.

Liquid I.V fuels your well-being with easy ways to stay hydrated. In just one stick, you're getting five essential vitamins and hydrating two times faster than with water alone. Whether you're like me and use your Liquid I.V while you're prepping for the day or if you're traveling and long flights are coming up like I am on this week, Liquid I.V is an essential addition to your routine.

I always have Liquid I.V with me when I travel. Especially anytime I'm headed toward a higher elevation than usual for me, woof, Liquid I.V is literally the only way I don't get a headache.

It comes in slim little packets that are easy to slide into your purse or carry on, a backpack. There are so many delicious flavors to choose from. I'm partial to the acai. But y'all know the energy multiplier and lemon ginger is a close second favorite for me.

Liquid I.V is made with premium ingredients and contains three times the electrolytes of traditional sports drinks. But what it does not have: no GMOs, no gluten, no dairy, no soy, and no worries. So grab your Liquid I.V in bulk nationwide at Costco, or you can get 15% off when you go to [liquidiv.com](https://liquidiv.com) and use the code THATSOUNDSFUN at checkout. That's 15% off anything you order when you shot better hydration today using the promo code THATSOUNDSFUN at [liquidiv.com](https://liquidiv.com).

And now back to Mike and Helen's conversation.

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**Mike:** As I think about somebody listening who resonates with your experience, this might be a Korean American woman or Chinese American woman, it might be somebody who's not Asian American, but understands what it's like to be othered.

I think often about W. E. B. Du Bois who wrote a legendary book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. And he talked about double consciousness. And it's basically the struggle of navigating the tension between two identities: being black and being American. So I hear you articulating the same thing. You know, it's double consciousness, but in terms of your Korean heritage.

What advice would you give—and I'll be specific to other Asian Americans, but I think we can all learn from your wisdom on this—what advice would you give other Asian Americans who are wrestling with that tension and trying to navigate that and trying to land in a place of peace about their Asian American heritage? What advice would you give?

**Helen:** I think first is to recognize: what is the source of that tension? Why was I experiencing it to begin with? I'll tell a story maybe, and it'll help me get into this. I have three boys. And when my eldest was in junior high school, one night we were talking before he went to bed and he said, "Mom, I'm really struggling. I don't think I'm very handsome." I said, "All right, where did that come from?" Of course, you know, moms think all their own kids are handsome or beautiful, or that sort of thing.

So I tried to reassure him in that moment. And I tried to then probe further to find out, wait, what's prompting this? And he said, "You know, when I look around, all the boys who seem to get the attention, none of them looked like me." And I started to understand, he was talking about the fact that he, as an Asian American, in context, so he was often the only or one of the very few Asian Americans, was comparing himself to kind of a white normative context. And that was what was provoking this feeling of "I'm not as good, I'm not as handsome, etc."

That's partly the root of where some of this stems from or the origins of where these feelings start is because we are comparing ourselves to a white normative context for many of us. So of course, if we're not aware that that's kind of the underbelly of it all, we can just go down this rabbit hole of just thinking poorly of ourselves, thinking worse of ourselves because we don't realize that that's where it's starting.

It's starting from a saying, "Okay, this is the norm. This is the right way, this is the only way, this is the better way." And so of course, we fall short. No, you have to go right to that source of the white normativity is just an evil, evil... It's an evil construct that is not at all the way God wants it to be, not at all what He has called us all to be as image bearers of the Lord, equal in His eyes, equally valued in His eyes.

No matter what ethnic background we come from, no matter what our racial background is, we are called to see each other as image bearers of God and to value each other equally. And it's when that doesn't happen that we get into these mindsets that are totally and completely false, that we are not as good as, we are not as valued. It's just a lie. I mean, it's a lie from the pit of hell. I don't know how else to put it except to just name it.

**Mike:** Say what it is. Absolutely.

**Helen:** Name it as such, right?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Helen:** So I think for people of color to understand that that lie is so insidious we sometimes don't even realize how much it's shaping our own self-perception or our own self-understanding. So that's, I think, a starting point: to recognize it's invisible. You can't necessarily see it, but you know it when you start experiencing it. And to identify when that happens I think is a really important starting point.

I think it's helpful to then find others who maybe are in their own journey of understanding their Asian Americans who can help you identify when that lie is operating, who can help you name it, and repudiate it and claim the truth that you are valued. And you, in the unique way God has created you, that is His gift to you in terms of your ethnic heritage. And to just own that truth.

So it takes I think finding folks who can help you just own that truth, name that truth. And it helps you also to see the ways that the white normativity can prevent us from owning that truth.

**Mike:** Wow. As a mom, I'm sure that was a tough moment for you listen to your son. There's been so many studies done on that very dynamic. And so this isn't just a subjective personal experience. It is that but this has just been well documented. And I think it's helpful for Asian Americans, African Americans, just people of color in general to recognize the effect that that can have on us. Ways that we can perpetuate that against others, and that we can just embrace it for ourselves. So thank you for sharing that.

You mentioned this kind of normativity. One of the things I've seen is... I know it's not out of nowhere. It probably feels out of nowhere to me. It probably isn't to you. But I've seen Asian American culture... it's almost like it's having a moment of like... just in terms of like, pop culture and entertainment. And obviously, we still have a long way to go, I think, in terms of equitable access and resources and opportunities.

But I heard you talking on another podcast, and so I was stalking you-

**Helen:** Oh dear. Oh, oh.

**Mike:** as I was preparing you for this interview. But I thought this was so fascinating. I heard you talking about significant pop culture moments that have kind of brought Asian American culture into the mainstream. So when you were talking, I was like, Is there a book on this? I just was so fascinated because I'm one who has consumed some of those pop culture moments but without really understanding the significance of it.

So can you walk us through like what are some of them that comes to your mind where Asian Americans were almost kind of like, yes, we're out here, you know?

**Helen:** Oh, gosh, I'll try. There are books out there. I wish I could remember the name of one, in particular, that's come up on this particular topic. So I'll have to send it to you later so you can put it in the show notes.

As a kid growing up, I hardly ever saw Asian Americans on the screen, right, on the small screen. The only time I remember seeing Korean characters was when the sitcom *M.A.S.H.* was on. Do you remember *M.A.S.H.*? It was set in the Korean War. Right. Actors were not often even Korean portray for some of the characters in the show. I would see *The Brady Bunch* and... Again, white normativity, right?

So in 19... I think it was 1991 comes to mind, maybe it was 1994, it was in the 90s, where there was a sitcom called *All-American Girls* during the comedian Margaret Cho that came on screen. I was so excited. Like, "Oh, my goodness, does it mean a Korean American family is gonna be depicted in a sitcom?"

The show was not good, and was critically panned. And it was a moment I think of collective shame honestly.

**Mike:** Wait, wait, wait, why? Why? I don't remember that show but why was it not received well?

**Helen:** Oh, why was it panned? So aside from Margaret Cho herself who did have not as much creative power I think that she would have wanted, none of the other producers, directors, writers, none of them were Korean American. So how can you depict the reality of a Korean American family without having a creative force behind the show be Korean American?

**Mike:** How?

**Helen:** Margaret, was the only one, and you heard later on after the fact how many challenges she had trying to even be like in the center of the show, but not have all the creative power to be able to make decisions she wanted.

So those of us who were Korean American watching it just felt like it was so inauthentic, it just didn't ring true. I think there was, again, a lot of other critical errors that the show made such that it was not renewed. It didn't last very very long.

And it wasn't until like decades and decades later we had *Fresh Off the Boat*, which was another sitcom that came on to ABC depicting a Taiwanese American family based off of Eddie Huang's memoir. So that did better, which was good. We are all

collectively, I think, Asian Americans who care about pop culture were breathing a sigh of relief from that show.

**Mike:** Okay, good, because I was withholding my commentary because I was about to say that show is hilarious. But I was like, If Asian Americans didn't like it, I don't want to out myself as ignorant.

**Helen:** Probably there was a range of reactions. But it did better. At least it did better.

**Mike:** It did better. Okay.

**Helen:** But I mean, for those of us watching, I mean, just imagine that. Like you see yourself reflected on the screen so infrequently that once every 20 years a show comes along, and you have to hope it does okay, because if this doesn't do well, there may not ever be another one.

**Mike:** Wow. Wow.

**Helen:** Think of how different that experience is than for the typical viewer of sitcoms who get to see themselves reflected all the time, all the time in family, dramas, or whatever it might be.

So you started to kind of start to see a little bit of okay, at least there's like a little bit more openness to having content reflecting Asian American characters on the screen. Somehow, it made enough money probably, but it felt like, okay, it's worth doing this.

And then *Crazy Rich Asians* came onto the big screen. I think that was an interesting cultural moment because it seemed like everybody was loving this movie. And I'm glad on one hand that there was a movie that seemed to do well in the box offices that made future Hollywood directors, producers, and creators say "Yeah, yeah, movies, content about Asian Americans can do well, so we should keep making them." So I was happy about that on one hand.

But you know, it's depicting a very specific kind of story right of a very, very wealthy Chinese family based in China. So it was kind of interesting mix. You had a Chinese family depicted, you had a Chinese American, you had one in the middle. But some of those dynamics I think were maybe harder for a typical American viewer who is not themselves Asian to see some of those distinctions, if that makes any sense.

**Mike:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.



**Helen:** I guess what I'm trying to get at is that we need a lot more stories, we need a lot more narratives that are both set in Asia, but also set in America as well and kind of having the chance to see more Asian American stories. So I love seeing that K-pop is so popular. I love seeing that K-dramas are watched like worldwide. That's exciting. I loved seeing how popular *Squid Game* was when you had all the box office records, all the records on Netflix. But there's still-

**Mike:** Watching *Squid Game* is traumatizing.

**Helen:** It is. So don't watch if you're not into-

**Mike:** Oh my God. I saw so many people talking about it. I was like, "Why is this thing so big?" My wife can't watch anything like that. And so when I'm home by myself I was like, "Let me check out *Squid Game*." And the first episode I was like, "Man."

**Helen:** Yeah, be careful. Yes, parental advisory. It is violent. And so there's part of me that was excited that you see all this content by Asian creatives being accepted globally. But there for me, just as a point of clarification, there is a difference between seeing something that comes from a Korean director or Korean television producer, director, actors and something that is Korean American.

I can appreciate it, I'm excited for it, I love seeing it but there is still kind of a distance in it. It's still seen as like a foreign product because it is—it comes from Korea. So that is for me as a Korean American. I think about it and I notice those distinctions. I want to see more Asian American stories.

I love when I do see quality Asian American narratives depicted. Like I think one of the one things that we're seeing from Mindy Kaling on Netflix is the show *Never Have I Ever* depicting an Indian American family. It's so good. It's good. It honors the culture but also depicts a particular Indian American experience. I've loved watching that show was another example of something that feels very American. It's an Indian American tale. It is an American tale. I love those kinds of experiences because we need more of those.

**Mike:** So let me ask you on that note then, what are... One of the things I've learned... Well, first of all, you mentioned *Crazy Rich Asians*. When that came out and it's this Box Office smash hit and everybody's watching and talking about it, there seemed to be so much anticipation building up in general but specifically in the Asian American community.

And then when I talked to my friends afterwards, there were very split reactions to it individual to individual, but even I would say kind of ethnic community to

whether it's Korean or Chinese or whatever. And then you just mentioned this story kind of depicting this Indian American family.

What are some of the... let's call it intramural. What are some of the new nuances within the Asian American communities? So you have these different ethnic national kind of populations that make up what we call the Asian American community. What are some of those nuances that may be imperceptible? For those of us on the outside, we may not even be aware of some of those dynamics.

**Helen:** They were Asian, of course. It is a potentially a political term that kind of groups together so many different cultural groups. I think it's well over 50 different ethnicities are included in that term "Asian." Even if you even like drill it down to like East Asian, if we're talking about East Asian, meaning like Chinese, Japanese, Korean, those three cultures are very, very, very, very different.

And in fact, you know, if I were to talk to my parents and ask them, What do you think the differences are between someone who's Chinese versus someone who's Korean versus someone who's Japanese? You know, for Koreans who experienced colonization on one hand and conquering on the other hand from these two nations, they would say, Absolutely, these are very different nations.

My parents even struggled at the idea that I would buy a Japanese car because it was even hard for them to think about supporting an economy of a country that had colonized them, and been a very, very difficult situation for Koreans at that time.

So there's lots of histories and lots of nuances between these nations. And that's just East Asia we're talking about. There's East Asian, there's Southeast Asian, there's South Asian. You've got within even those three categories so many different language, hundreds of languages included.

In China itself, you've got a number of different languages and dialects. So there's cultural differences, there's historical narratives that form kind of an undercurrent of a foundation of history that makes it... If you don't know all that history, it's easy kind of to mistake and imagine they're all just one. No, they think of themselves very, very differently as cultural groups.

You have assimilation patterns, too. So you could have someone here in the US who is fourth or fifth-generation Chinese American whose great, great, great, great, great grandparents immigrated here, you know, long, long ago, which is very different from someone who's just arrived and who is a first generation Chinese American. That whole immigration pattern is another whole part of the story.

You have some people who are here, who have come to the US as refugees, as political refugees. and that is another whole story and dynamic that is so unique, and so painful and so different and so just fraught with its own history and its own narrative.

So whenever we use the term Asian American, and I've used it a zillion times even in this conversation, but whenever I use it, there is a part of me that always feels that twinge of "I know this is reductionistic. I know this is oversimplifying." And there's so much nuance, and there's so much distinction between all these cultural groups. But it is for ease where we've come to in terms of being able to like group the segment together.

**Mike:** Well, and I'll confess my own ignorance. I mean, I remember one time I was officiating pastor, for listeners that don't know, and I'm officiating a wedding. It was a Chinese couple and Chinese family. And I was after the wedding walking with one of the other guests. I didn't know him, he didn't know me. We just happened to be walking back to our cars the same time.

So we were talking, and this is embarrassing to admit, but literally I started asking him questions about like the Chinese like American experience. I just assumed because the family was Chinese and the couple was Chinese and I'm walking with him and he looked roughly, you know, Asian American. And I just started... And then he was super gracious. It was kind of a dry humor, but he was dead serious. He was like, "I'm Korean." Oh, you know?

And the reason I share that, as embarrassing as it is, is because there are a ton of people listening who have had those moments or are on the brink of having. You don't even know you're about to have it yet because you don't know what you don't know. Like I don't know what I don't know.

What are some of the mistakes that us non-Asian folks make? Like some of the common ones that you would say these are some of the most common hurtful mistakes that non-Asian American folks make in our interactions with other Asian Americans.

**Helen:** Thank you for sharing that story. I think sometimes it's hard to own those mistakes. And you know what? We all make them. I will make them sometimes when I talk about other cultural groups. So I think giving ourselves some grace to know we are going to make those mistakes. And when you do, just face them with humility and say "I'm sorry." So don't expect... even in your learning, even in my learning, you know, none of us will be perfect.

But that said, I'd say, okay, I have this list in my head of different topics. They all end with "ing". So stereotyping, I think, is one area where Asian Americans are often stereotyped. Meaning people will fall into generalizations about Asian Americans that do not by any means apply or are not fair. Like, all Asians are good at math and science. Things like that. So stereotyping certainly can be problematic.

Othering. We've talked about this idea of being othering. Like when someone looks at me and their immediate assumption is that I'm not from here. We talked about that earlier. This idea of being a perpetual foreigner. That's a phrase that Asian Americans know really well.

Every single time we're asked, "Where are you from?" And when I say, "I'm from Chicago? Where are you really from?" That phrase, what that evokes in me is "You don't think I'm American. You don't trust I'm American." And that always, I think, is a painful experience for many Asian Americans.

**Mike:** On that, because I've heard that a lot, you know, as I've been doing my own journey, is there a better question? Because sometimes I genuinely just want to know. I want to know where you're from. There have been times in ignorance that I literally was talking about, like what country? And then there's been other times where I'm just like, "You know, are you from Bethesda? Are you from New York City?" Is there a better question? Because even as you frame and you talk about the perpetual foreigner, that helps me so much understand why there's hurt behind that question. What's a better way to ask that question?

**Helen:** I think asking people about their ethnic identity is okay. Tell me about your ethnic identity. Tell me about your ethnic heritage. Tell me about your ethnic identity journey. Those questions, I think, are perfectly acceptable. And it gives the person the opportunity to tell that story however they want to tell it. And maybe there is a beginning that began. Maybe they weren't born in Asia at some point in time, you don't know. But that way you can give them the agency to figure out how to tell that story.

I think it's okay to ask like, "Are you from Bethesda because that makes it clear that you are specifically asking like, "Do you live around here?" That I think is also in another way if you want to truly know that someone come from this neighborhood or this community, then there won't be any misunderstanding or any assumption.

[00:52:48] <music>

**Sponsor:** Hey friends! Just interrupting one more time to tell you about another amazing partner, [Nutrafol](#). I work in an office with a lot of women and you know we talk

about our hair, what products we love, which style and tools actually work for us, what to do when we're dealing with shedding and thinning.

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**Sponsor:** So I've been podcasting since 2014. And let me tell you, things are definitely changing and have definitely changed and grown in the podcast world from the technology to the variety of options to the number of people listening to podcast. It's part of the reason we grew from the That Sounds Fun podcast to the That Sounds Fun Network.

All that growth, experience, and learning leads us to refine the tools we use for bringing you all of these great shows. And one that we absolutely cannot live without is Anchor.

You've probably heard me say it before, but Anchor is seriously the easiest way to make a podcast. It's free, as in it costs you zero doll-hairs, but it has simple-to-use creation tools that allow you to record and edit your podcast right from your phone or computer.

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We hear from people all the time who have great ideas and are looking for how to get their podcast started. Well, Anchor is what we use across the That Sounds Fun Network. And we are just huge fans of how easy they make it to create great-sounding, far-reaching podcast episodes.

Just download the free Anchor app or go to [anchor.fm](https://anchor.fm) to get started. Again, that's [anchor.fm](https://anchor.fm) or you can download the free Anchor app today.

And now back to finish up with Mike and Helen's conversation.

[00:56:22] <music>

**Mike:** I have a few more things maybe to watch out for. So we talked about stereotyping. We talked about othering. Mocking is an absolute no. And what I mean by that is... I heard this just happened just recently on the hit show *Abbott Elementary*. I don't watch it but I was noticing on Twitter that all of a sudden my Asian American friends were commenting. And I think I've heard it's an excellent show. So I think this is just one of those off moments.

But apparently one of the main characters did kind of a kung fu martial arts type of mocking kind of a moment. And those kinds of moments are really painful for Asian Americans because it makes me feel like our culture is able to be just made fun of, it's not valued, it's just something you can just joke about and there's no kind of honor afforded to cultural reality.

So there are ways to talk about martial arts that are honoring and there are ways that are not too. I think mocking, using any kind of mocking language, which my kids have heard many, many times and racialized taunting is so painful. It's so painful. And it just, again, makes you feel like you don't belong, belong here.

And then downplaying. If an Asian American says, "That was hurtful. I wish you wouldn't hadn't said that," or "I wish you wouldn't use that kind of language" or "I

wish you didn't kind of treat our culture in that way," if you were to hear back, "I was just joking. I didn't mean anything by it," that kind of downplaying just adds to the hurt. It just adds to the hurt.

So I think we don't want to be people who hurt other people. So I think if someone is telling you that that was hurtful, then we want to honor that risk they took to tell us that something was hurtful and apologize. Yeah, and just apologize.

And then ignoring. You know, I think sometimes Asian Americans are often ignored in the conversation about race. Sometimes race becomes like this black-white dynamic. And I think that can be hard for Asian Americans to feel like there's been a lot of discrimination and a lot of prejudice too that our community has experienced.

In just even the last two years since the pandemic, Asian American, Pacific Islander hatred has gone up significantly. There's a whole hashtag Stop AAPI Hate that has been had tracking. The incidence of Asian American racial violence, those numbers have just continued to increase at a rate that's alarming. There still, unfortunately, is a lot of prejudice and discrimination and hatred toward Asian American Pacific Islanders in this country. So just knowing that and just being able to just say, "Okay, we don't want to ignore those incidences. We want to just recognize them and stand against them. That's important.

**Mike:** Is there any advice you give those of us who want to lean in and we want to learn, but we also want to speak up and advocate and work toward justice as it relates to issues affecting Asian Americans. I remember after the Atlanta shooting, which was so traumatic, being a pastor within a congregation that has such a high percentage of Asian Americans, it was so tragic and yet there was a sacred... It was a sacred experience for me to get to sit...

I've had so many people in our church thankfully, not everybody, but a lot of people in our church were upset with me when I've gone through the pain of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and all that. So it was a sacred experience for me to be able to sit with and learn from and lament with brothers and sisters in our church.

And I just did a little part that I could. I recorded a little video speaking to Asian American sisters and brothers in our church, which honestly got some pushback from other people in our church. But that was just a little thing that I could do just on my phone.

Is there any advice you would give for those of us that want to learn but that also want to work to shed light on and help in any little way that we can build a more just society for Asian American and Pacific Islander folks in our country?

**Helen:** Well, first of all, I'm so glad that you took the time and effort to say something. I think in the church, in particular, when there's a willingness for church leaders to just name those moments of racial violence and to lament, give space for that, that's tremendously helpful and healing. It affords you the opportunity for healing because if it's ignored, that hurts so much more.

I feel like so many Christian churches and organizations still missed the boat there. I know a number of my Asian American friends who were so frustrated when nothing was said about those Atlanta shootings, there was no acknowledgment of what this means for Asian American and Asian Americans to witness yet another incident of violence but perpetuated clearly towards the Asian American community, and nothing is said from anyone in their Christian organizations or churches? That's so painful.

So just being even willing to see those moments and to take time to acknowledge them, that's huge to be able to use your voice in whatever way you're given the opportunity to use a voice. To do that, whether in social media or whether in an organizational context.

And then I think if you're, at the next level, trying to figure out what do we say or do, I think you did exactly the right thing, which is reaching out to Asian Americans to get their perspective on how would this best be handled. Like just giving agency to those who are most in pain to make some of those determinations of how best to talk about it, how best to acknowledge it, how best to recognize it, how to lament over it. Just being willing to let those who have been the most hurt, be the ones to create the right treatment, I think is a really helpful prescriptive way to go about it.

And there might not be full agreement but just giving, again, agency to a group of people who might be able to collectively together figure out the right way to go forward, I think is really helpful. It takes more time. It means a loss of control. It's all those things that are really, really hard to do. But I think it's super important for an individual just even being able to note who do they follow on social media, if you're a person who uses social media.

Are the leaders that you tend to follow, if you look and see who they all are, are you someone who is actively trying to learn from Asian American leaders? Are you following Asian American leaders or other leaders of color to try to learn from



them to ascertain what's the right thing to do, as opposed to like speaking first, listening first, learning first, I think is really, really important?

And then amplifying other people's voices, especially from those communities that have been most hurt I think is a really wise thing to do. You don't always have to be the person to speak up. You can be the one to give your platform to others, so that they can make proper expressions that you can learn from and support.

**Mike:** All right, I want to make a hard pivot. I know—thank you so much—I've already taken up a lot of your time, but there's no way I can have you on and not ask about this. So you are director of product innovation at InterVarsity Press, right?

**Helen:** Yes, that's my title.

**Mike:** And so, man, I got to somehow on some platform get you want again to be able to talk more about-

**Helen:** Let's do that.

**Mike:** ...what this season of your life has been devoted to, you know, which is helping to get some of these resources out in the world. But I do thank you not just as a host of this episode but personally for the ways that you have just so vulnerably and wisely and graciously shared out of your own personal experience, but also out of just accumulated wisdom from walking through these issues for so long.

As an African American man, as a pastor, as somebody who's trying to grow myself, I've just learned so much. I mean, I was trying not to stop you every two seconds because there's just so much context you gave that actually locked some things into place for me and just helped me to even understand some of my own thoughts, my own experiences.

I didn't even get to talk to you about, as a black man, the ways that I grew up thinking about Asian Americans. And so even as you went through all the other ring and stereotyping and all of that, I just found myself thinking, "I've done all of those things. All those things." And God in His grace and just the graciousness and courageous, truthfulness of other people around me, I've been able to identify some of those and grow in some of those. And then I'm still finding ways in which I still need to be transformed. So you've been a part of that, you know, for me today. So I really, really appreciate you being on.

I got to end with this question. Because the episode is called That Sounds Fun, what is fun to you? What do you do for fun? Don't tell me read book manuscripts.

**Helen:** I was about to say that.

**Mike:** What do you do for fun?

**Helen:** What do I do for fun? Well, you know, you're gonna laugh at this. I have three boys, I mentioned, and I love watching my boys do their thing. So my eldest is a pianist, so I love watching him perform. My middle son is a baseball player, I love watching him pitch. My youngest is a bowler and I love watching him bowl. And seeing each of them-

**Mike:** Wait, like in a league?

**Helen:** Oh, yeah.

**Mike:** Oh, bowling leagues are coming back. Yes.

**Helen:** Let me tell you, the world of competitive youth bowling is this thing. And boy, they need more kids of color. That's another whole topic we can talk about. I recently had a conversation with the Vice President of the United States Bowling Congress because I was frustrated that in their diversity issues.

**Mike:** This is really a thing.

**Helen:** They ignored Asian Americans. I'm like, "Okay, we got to talk." But yes, this is a thing.

**Mike:** Wow.

**Helen:** And they need more youth of color who can really help with the sport. But yeah, it's amazing. The youth bowling is massively intense and super fun when you start getting into it.

**Mike:** I just went bowling last week. I'm like-

**Helen:** Did you?

**Mike:** I did. I really did. That's amazing. I'm looking into that. That's awesome. Well, thanks so much for being so gracious with your time. I've really enjoyed interviewing you and having you on the podcast.

**Helen:** It was a pleasure. Thank you so much, Pastor Mike.

**Mike:** Absolutely.

[01:07:19] <music>

**Outro:** Oh, you guys, aren't they incredible? I know. I know. I know. Oh, gosh, Mike Kelsey for President. Right? Oh, I love that guy. Hey, be sure to grab a copy of *The Race-Wise Family*, *The Missional Mom*, or *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*, depending on what applies to your current situation. And follow Helen on social media so you can tell her thanks for being on the show.

And let's be sure to give all the love to Mike Kelsey for hosting the show this week. He is just my absolute favorite. I just adore him and his wife Ashley, their kids. So Mike Kelsey for President. I'll say it again.

And if you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. All the places you may need me, that is how you can find me.

I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home and do something that sounds fun to you. I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me is seeing new places in Israel I've never seen because that is where I am. Y'all have a great day.

We'll see you back here on Thursday to continue learning with Mike Kelsey and his dear friend, Pastor Mitchel Lee. We'll see y'all then.