

Christ Above Labels (Ephesians 2:11-22)

Over the past couple of years, Teresa and I have been following a diet plan that has us paying more attention to food labels showing what's actually in the products we're eating. It's handy to have labels that tell you the ingredients and the nutritional value. Of course it's helpful to read the "best if used by" label, and when it comes to salsa it's important to note whether it's mild, medium or hot. This regimen helps us to make informed choices—it's good to know what's in the food we're eating and whether or not it's good or beneficial. The down side is noting that some "favorites" have little or no nutritional value. Who knew that cheese puffs are basically filler? Sometimes we've made decisions about what to eat or not based on ingredients, and realized on that basis that one "comfort" food doesn't make the cut...like brats, which then causes you to face a tough decision.

What if people had labels, like food, describing what's in that person? Are they "good" for you? What if the "best if used by" label noted that 7PM was the cutoff—that there wasn't much left after 7? What would mild, medium, or hot mean?

Of course, people don't come with labels, but we tend to assign them, don't we? Making assessments about others is part of our cultural landscape. Sometimes it's rather benign, almost like a pastime—we turn it into a hobby of sorts and call it people-watching. We make judgments about people who are just passing by on the basis of what they're wearing, what they're carrying, what they're doing or not doing, how they carry themselves. Sometimes it's not so harmless because we'll dismiss or belittle others on the basis of something external, or by a word or phrase they use, or positions they hold, or by some pre-conceived idea of what certain people are like that overrides everything else that may be true about that person or group of people.

Usually we engage in this using ourselves as the measure of what's right or good regardless of whether or not we ourselves measure up with what's right or good by an objective value or metric. Inevitably these assessments lead us to group together with others who share our views, and by osmosis, gaps open up between ourselves—our tribe—and others that re-inforce and shape our identity and our assumptions about others. We settle comfortably into these identities and assumptions, and life as we see it moves along smoothly so far as people know their place.

But then, something cataclysmic enters creation shattering everyone's paradigm. Jesus enters into humanity, an objective metric of what is right and good according to God's value and design, and the scales of our measurement all tip against us, and we're faced with a decision in the face of a challenging diagnosis: do we accept the diagnosis, or do we seek a second opinion? The good news is that Jesus is not just diagnostic, he is also prescriptive. He offers the means to escape the grim diagnosis. His appearance among us isn't for the purpose of condemnation, but for restoration. No matter where we land on the scale, Jesus brings balance where the scale tips us back towards God's life and values. As we discovered and affirmed last week, the power accomplishing this shift came from God—ours is simply to receive it which then enables us to be right with God and be filled with God's goodness expressed through actions that further God's work in us and in the world.

Yet, this is not a singular enterprise that we pursue individually and independently, it's a joint effort shared with all who follow Jesus which is the principal point of this section of Paul's letter before us today. In the heart of this section stands a cross both literally and figuratively, the cross that delivers a vertical restoration between humanity and God but at the same time it creates a horizontal reconciliation for persons and groups with one another because all who follow Jesus become part of God's household, God's family, siblings together united to one another by their union with God through Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is actually a kin-dom, we are kin to each other, in fact, a new humanity whose world-based hostility is defeated through the work and word of Christ whose promise is peace, if we'll have it.

The harsh reality is that we have the capability to be at peace with one another, but we may not have the will for it. This places us somewhat in the same situation as a child struggling to swallow some distasteful medicine. We want enough medicine to make us feel

better, but we don't want the whole dose. In this case, taking the whole dose means dropping the labels we've attached to ourselves and others which means re-ordering our perspective to see the world and others in it differently than before. It means coming to terms with the fact that in Christ, others whom we have labeled as "less than," or "far away," or "blame-worthy" are equally loved by God, equally valued by God, eagerly sought by God, and equivalent, worthy partners in our joint enterprise of displaying and declaring God's mercy and blessing in the world. Realizing this actually stuns our sensibilities—it shouldn't, but it does, and it did from the church's inception.

One of the early church's more formidable challenges was this very issue. The book of Acts documents how this tendency towards labeling and distancing was at work among the early followers of Jesus. His initial followers were primarily Jews who recognized Jesus as messiah and savior, but then, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the apostles began preaching to Gentiles who also became followers of Jesus, then Samaritans were responding to the gospel, an Ethiopian leader was baptized into Christ, the gospel was sweeping through the Roman Empire and the initial followers—the Jewish believers—were incensed: what are we to do with all these "outsiders" now following Jesus without becoming Jews first? It came to a head at a council called in Jerusalem to address this very concern. After prayer, testimony, and reasoned discernment, the leadership came to understand that these so-called outsiders weren't at all—they were insiders as much as any of them were, they weren't adversaries, but allies, not strangers or second-class citizens, but family, sisters and brothers in Christ in whom the Spirit of Christ lived and through whom the glory of the Lord was being revealed.

Whatever labels had been attached by them—the so-called insiders—were torn away as their vision for what God was doing through Christ enlarged as their partnership with others increased so that they could, in fact, do exactly what Christ had commissioned them to do: to make disciples of all nations, in all the world. And these far-flung disciples were every bit as much included in the household of God as Gentiles, as Samaritans, as Ethiopians.

Like them, we come to realize that no one person or group is the gold standard for establishing credentials for inclusion. Christ alone is the standard; Christ alone is the basis for our standing, Christ himself is our credential and theirs whoever they are and from wherever they come. This is the new humanity of which Paul wrote—not that we are uniform in our appearance, but that we are united to Christ who is then brilliantly displayed in the splendor of humankind's variety each adding a complementary hue to the overall picture.

Friends, how can we hang onto labels limiting inclusion in the face of this compelling image that finds formerly distanced tribes delighting in how others uniquely express the fullness of Christ in humanity? Is there a need for peace in the world today? Is there a need for peace in our nation today? Is there a hope for peace available to us? There absolutely is, if we'll have it. And this is the tough decision we face—do we want it? God wants it—God has always wanted it, but the sad history of humanity even among people of faith is that we have not always wanted what God wants. It's not always as blatant as that sounds. At some levels most of us would agree to this vision of restored humanity at peace with God and one another, but we insulate ourselves against the hard work of bringing this about by consigning it to some ethereal future, but in the meantime we live with the reality of our imperfections and implore God's grace. Friends, grace is not like overdraft protection against sin. Grace is the power of God given to Christ followers to fully live into all the possibilities of right standing and right actions that line up with God's desire for us right now.

God's grace gives us the ability to engage in thoughtful self-reflection to honestly assess the labels we've placed on others, to examine the basis for them, to determine how we've acquired them, to quit-claim their hold on us, and to outline a means for replacing them with the declaration of loved in Christ. Beyond this, because they belong to Christ, they are united to us and we to them—they are kin in Christ, and partners in the work to which we are called: to display the splendor of the kingdom in the unity and love of Christ himself who is present in all who follow him.

Paul reminded the Ephesians that were once far away from God, but they had been brought near through the blood of Christ. Someone in their day didn't consider them beyond

God's reach—thank God for this. What great treasures of spiritual insight would we have missed out on had the Ephesians been written off. Instead, they were reached with the gospel, they became partners in the work of restoring humanity to God and one another, and we benefit because they were written to, and we're gaining from that letter.

Who is "far away" in our day? Who have we written off? Are we depriving the Spirit of the instrument for displaying the splendor of Christ because we regard some kin in Christ as step-children in faith. Are we still viewing some loved ones in Christ with labels given them in worldly hostility? Where is the hope for peace in our world? With whom must we combine our efforts to bring peace and well-being to the world? "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Friends, this is what God wants in the world—do we? AMEN