

## **Making Confetti Out of Labels**

John walks through the door and extends his hand to the stranger. As the stranger shakes it he says: “You’re tall.” To the 6’7” John, this is not news. But rather than responding with the elegant sarcasm of which he is capable, John, being the kind, Christian soul that he is, says simply: “Yes, I am.” John has been told he is tall hundreds of time, but one does not have to tell him. He knows. Tall is a label with which John lives. And to the inevitable follow up question: “Do you play basketball?” John again replies simply: “No.” He does not respond with words about his love for his wife and beautiful, new baby daughter, his gifts as a graphic artist, his passion for beautifully restored cars, or the hours he spends serving his church and his God. That, at this moment, is beyond the label and beside the point. John is tall.

What is your label? What are some of the things about you that make you unique, that make you different, that make you you? There are so many possibilities. Labels identify the ways that we are different. There are some obvious labels that initially define us. In the burgeoning field of corporate, diversity training, these are called the primary factors of diversity. Take me for example. If I walked through the door and you never saw me before you identify me initially by some basic labels, by some primary diversity factors. White. Short. Not thin. Woman. (Considering the birthday I have coming up I would say middle-aged but that would mean I would live to 120). You would, of course, see my race, stature, gender, age. You would see the obvious ways that I am different. But would you go beyond those initial labels?

If you did you would begin to discover all the secondary diversity factors about me. Where are you from? Where did you go to school? What is your profession? Do you wear the label mother? You could probe further. What campaign bumper stickers are you sporting? How do you feel about abortion, gun control, the war in Iraq, slot machines? If you are still talking to me, you might keep going. Risk taker or cautious? Introvert or extravert? Punctual or flexible? And on through an endless list of the ways that we are different. And, as we sort through the differences, we quickly and quietly determine if that difference unites us or separates us. Difference.

Whether primary or secondary, gage your reactions to these labels: Republican. Democrat. Gay. Straight. Masters Degree. GED. Dundalk. Ruxton. Engineer. Salesman. Priest. Mexican. Iraqi. Palestinian. Jew. Deaf. Disabled. Liberal. Conservative. Add more than one factor at a time. A 72 year old Roland Park woman. A 17 year-old black urban male. A Mormon corporate executive. What are your preconceived ideas about a person based on one of those, or countless other, labels? What are the labels that make it difficult for you to see the person underneath? What if I had come in here this evening and said in a southern drawl: "I have come up from Alabama to preach to you all?" Contrast that with your expectations if I had said I had a degree from Princeton Theological Seminary. What are your biases based on those facts? How are your perceptions determined by that information? Differences. Labels. Biases. Preconceptions. They permeate our lives and our interactions. They are the source of energy and discovery and productivity. They are the source of conflict and misunderstanding and pain. And they are, according to Paul, gifts? Why?

How are you different? What makes you unique? One of the most amazing ways to reflect on this question is to think about the numerical odds

of you being exactly who you are. I think it is almost beyond computing. Think about all of the people throughout history, way back to the beginning of time, who had to come together, for you to be exactly who you are. Sometimes it is mind-boggling just to consider that your two parents found each other. That happened with your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents—all of this genetic coupling so that you could be you. Kind of takes your breath away, doesn't it? You are a mathematical miracle! The particular combination of traits and quirks and limitations and gifts that make you who you are doesn't exist anywhere else in the universe. You were born different. You are a cause for celebration!

And yet difference is frequently the cause not of celebration but of condemnation. There is the condemnation of self when one wishes to be someone other than who they are. There is the agony of being “different” in a family, of somehow feeling that those strangers picked up the wrong baby from the hospital nursery. There is the pain experienced by the child whose parent denies the child's difference and tries to mold that child in her or his own image rather than nurturing that child to be who God intended her to be. There are labels slapped on children by families. The smart one. Not so smart. The pretty one. The shy one. The klutz. There are labels pasted on children at school. Gifted. Talented. Honors. Special Ed. Nerd. Dweeb. Preppie. Loser. There are the labels we laugh off and the labels that have a lasting impact on the formation of self. What ones were stuck on you, and what ones stuck?

Labeling, even in its subtler form, leads to exclusion. It is when we say because you are this, and because you are not that, you cannot be in my club. Back to that child who is different? Who is tortured more than the child who is different? A story: I taught high school a long time ago. It was in a

time when America was exploding with rebellion and my kids were fighting for all kinds of rights, especially for dress code. One boy in my class—here's some labels; he was albino and wore thick glasses—wore his boy scout uniform to school. He was really blasted by the kids, and then I blasted them. That was the only day in my teaching career when I kept anyone after school. I kept the whole class after school. And you know what? They all came. And they brought other kids. There were kids in the desks, kids on the floor, kids along the windowsill. They came to talk about someone's right to be different. It was one of those moments you long for as a teacher, when minds grasp and hearts change.

Was there ever a time when you were treated differently based on a label someone placed on you? Okay. Let's start with the big ones. Have you ever been discriminated against because you were a woman? Or black? Or gay? Let's move to less obvious. Were you from a poorer neighborhood? Did your parents speak with an accent? Were you always the shortest kid or the last one chosen for baseball? Were you defined by a medical problem? Were you the eccentric in your family? Was your mother an alcoholic? Was your difference, the fact that maybe you were not quite as smart, communicated to you by cute, little elementary school names—like being in the Blue Bird reading group when everybody knew the smart kids were Robins? Were you classified by a job title that others saw as demeaning? Was the truth of you obscured by a label—one you imposed on yourself, or one that was imposed on you? When did you die just a little bit inside because you were judged by a label? When did you hurt because the “real” you languished undiscovered under a thick covering of “different?” And once you get in touch with that feeling, focus on it, remember it. For that feeling negates difference as gift and makes difference a punishment. That

feeling robs you of belonging and excludes you from community. The thing about differences is that when they become labels, when they become the only way we see someone, when they become something that we cannot see around or beyond, when they limit a person's potential or access to the community, then they are a gift denied, a blessing unfulfilled.

And it was with this exclusion based on difference, this denial of difference as gift, that Jesus dealt. The writers of the Gospels use labels all the time. Scan Matthew and John, Luke and Mark. Look at all the labels that define one as different, that set one apart. Fisherman. Tax collector. Demonic. Epileptic. Paralytic. Sick. Leper. Centurion. A woman who suffered from hemorrhages. Peter's mother-in-law. The woman at the well. Samaritan. The rich young ruler. The woman taken in adultery. Differences. Labels.

Throughout the Gospels a person is identified by profession, by illness, by position, by geography. And in each case, Jesus deals with the difference. First, he does not ignore it. In many cases, he not only acknowledges it, he acknowledges it as the defining factor. And then Jesus does whatever is necessary to show that the difference, however life defining it is, is not the ultimate reality. The leper is healed. The adulterous woman is forgiven. In the body of the Samaritan beats a compassionate heart. Differences are real and they matter, but wholeness and redemption—that which links them with the nature of God—is greater. So Jesus goes beyond the difference to the core, to the essence. He deals with whatever difference excludes that person from full participation in community. He confronts whatever prevents that person from being united with himself, with others, and with God. He heals the leper. He commands the paralytic to get up. He tells the rich young ruler to sell everything. He tells the woman at the well to

tell the unadorned truth. He tells Zaccheus to come down from the tree. In each case, he focuses in on what that person needs in order to be restored to wholeness, to relationship, to community.

So why, in all of these cases and in ours, is difference gift? Because by responding to another's need we are called into relationship with him. By genuinely responding to another's need we change; we become more of who God calls us to be. We discover, if we look carefully at what Jesus did and how Jesus did it, that moving beyond difference always calls us into relationship with another while drawing that person into relationship with us. Differences are gifts not just because we celebrate the uniqueness of the individual, but also because they create community. No—more than that. Differences require relationship; they demand community.

In contrast to how Jesus dealt with difference, consider how women and men have dealt with difference throughout history. When we cannot get past difference, when we cannot see beyond a label, we remain apart, separate. We could spend our morning on nothing but a reflection on how we react to labels, on how labels have driven our personal history and world history, on how they have determined who lives and who dies, who is in power and who is forced into submission.

Labeling in its most frightful incarnation has led to the worst atrocities in history. The Holocaust. The Inquisition. Slavery. Serbia. Bosnia. India. Pakistan. Cambodia. Rwanda. In all of these and so many other cases, the different one became the despised, the dispensable. To slaughter without conscience means convincing oneself that because someone is black or gay or female or a member of the wrong tribe they are less than human. To slaughter without conscience is to seek to become the most malicious kind of god. This slaughter has occurred in places where a hatred of someone

because of the label they wear leads to atrocities almost beyond our imagining.

But whether blatant or discreet, whether in the home of a parent who is trying to make a child something she will never be, whether in private or in public, condemning another solely on the basis of difference is a sin. It is a sin not just because it is the opposite of loving. It is a sin because it demeans, destroys and eventually kills. It is a sin because it has always been a way to break the first commandment. It has always been a way to try to be God. For if I can make you inferior for whatever reason then I am superior. And it is in our nature, perhaps, to long for the power that comes with that superiority, to make ourselves not only different, but better!

It is from this insanity that we are always, always--as exhausting as it is--called as Christians. It is from this exclusion that Jesus called others. To the leper, be healed, and when you are healed rejoin the community. To the woman at the well, don't lie about who you are. To Zacheus, come down from that tree. Your stature is not the issue. To the fisherman, drop your net. It is not the most important thing about you. To the adulterous woman, sin no more. To everyone who listens, love one another.

For too long those who have gathered in the name of Jesus have not taken seriously Christ's command: "Love one another." It is not a request. It is not a suggestion. Jesus said: "this new commandment I give onto you." For too long those who have gathered in the name of Jesus have contented themselves with singing "Jesus loves the little children—red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight" without really living like they believed it. For too long those who have gathered in the name of Jesus have feared standing up against unjust systems that subtly, but certainly, discriminate. For too long those who have gathered in the name of Jesus

have failed to act, not just to talk about but to act, for the dignity and respect of all persons. For too long those who have gathered in Jesus' name on Sunday have laughed at the racial joke on Monday. For too long we have been unwilling to do the very hard work of dealing with differences. We have failed to celebrate differences, to embrace differences as God-given gifts. I am not saying that I have succeeded in doing this. I am saying that as a Christian I am called to see past all the labels to the God within. We are called upon to try to stop thinking in terms of them and us and to start thinking in terms of community and unity. I confess this is not easy, that I have as many "thems and us" as anyone. I am saying that if I claim to be a follower of Jesus that I am supposed to see things—and people—differently. I am supposed to look past the labels to that within us that is divine. God knows Jesus did.

It is not that as humans we will not continue to react to differences. We always will. It is natural to say she is old, or he is Chinese, or he cannot see, or her politics are stupid. But as Christians we are called to see the truth behind the difference. So this day imagine this: we write all of our labels—those others call us and those we call ourselves and those we call others—on different pieces of colored paper, not just a few colors but as many colors as there are in a super-sized box of Crayolas. Imagine that we take all of those pieces of paper and rip them up. Next, all together, we march outside and gather on the lawn, in the sun. Then, at exactly the same moment, we throw them into the air. We create a sparkling, flickering, gorgeous shower of paper. We make confetti out of labels. And, in that one, shining, moment, we get a glimpse of that beautiful, diverse, grace-filled community: we get a peek at heaven! Amen.

Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. August 14, 2005

