

January 15

John 1:43-51

Labels that Blind Us

We all know that old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me!" We may have said it but deep down we all know this is untrue. Words have an incredible power to wound, to isolate, to marginalize and yes, to kill. One of the major causes of early teen suicide is bullying and most bullying is not physical but emotional battering. Using words and labels the bully so destroys another's self confidence that they ultimately take their lives to escape the pain. All of us have been affected by labels. If someone labels us: progressive, conservative, republican, democrat, etc and the person using the label is of the opposite view they may automatically decide that they want nothing to do with us. We are sometimes guilty of the same kind of response. We place a label or accept a label on someone or group and immediately make a decision about that individual or group.

I was in junior high in Seattle when mandatory busing for racial integration began. At my school we were all ushered into the auditorium for an informational meeting before the first bus arrived. I know the school leaders meant well but they did more harm than good, at least initially. To this day I remember the gist of what they said. It went something like this. Our new students are coming from the Capitol Hill area. The school they are coming from is in one of the poorest parts of the city. Most of these kids will have little money, not wear stylish clothes and come from broken homes. Even though they are way different from you, and here I need to add that my junior high bordered one of the more exclusive communities in Seattle at the time, you need to welcome them.

The school leaders were trying to help us to be sensitive to our new classmates but instead what occurred was they hung all sorts of labels on them. They made it very clear they were not like us. But I was a preacher's kid who wasn't much like those going to the junior high. I was more like those coming, not having much money and certainly not wearing the most current fashions. And over the coming months I was able to move

beyond the labels and two of my best friends in junior high were bused in students because we found out we had much in common.

The scripture today is a story about labels and how it can divide us. Philip had been called by Jesus to become a disciple. He had become absolutely certain that Jesus was the long awaited messiah. He went to his friend Nathaniel to share the good news. The long wait was over. God had sent the Messiah. Did Nathaniel believe his friend? Did he celebrate that God was on the move? No. His first response was to reject the idea that Jesus could be the messiah. Why? Because Jesus came from the town of Nazareth. Nathaniel knew the scriptures and in no place would you find a prophecy that the messiah would come from this little town, not even a town but more of a wide spot in the road. And further, Nazareth had a reputation that was less than stellar. No one of importance had ever been born in that town or lived in that town. It was a backwater kind of place that would never figure into some grand design of God. Jesus was from Nazareth and that meant to Nathaniel he could not be the messiah. By his tone Nathaniel likely communicated to Philip that he had had the wool pulled over his eyes. Nathaniel was saying in essence, "You had better cut your losses now and get back on the right track and don't waste your time following a pretender."

When have we rejected the potential actions by God because we have let labels get in the way? In just a couple of weeks we are going to be welcoming the Three Interfaith Amigos to Trinity. They are a Jewish Rabbi, Moslem Imam and a Christian Pastor. They are spreading a message of cooperation and how we are all from the same Abrahamic faith roots. I believe this is truly God at work. Yet there will be many who will choose to stay away because they have already made up their minds concerning the Islamic faith; they are all radical terrorist who want to destroy the world or convert it all by force, or the Jewish faith; they are all money making power brokers bent on manipulating world markets and governments for the sake of Israel. They reject the idea that there could be another view because after all, God could never work through Moslems or Jews.

Our natural response to meeting such intransigence in others is to argue our point and try to convince them that they are wrong and we are right by the force of our

logic and reasoning. The way I see it, this is what is happening in Congress a lot at the current time. Each side has given the other labels. Republicans are the party of small government and Tea Baggers and the Democrats are big spending big government liberals. Each side is trying to convince the other that they are right and the other is wrong. They are digging in their heels and refusing to negotiate or compromise because after all, they are right.

The number of times anyone has been able to convince another that their opinion is wrong by force of argument could probably be counted on one hand. It just doesn't work. When we hide behind labels believing in our own interpretation of events we will not be moved.

Philip understood this and so instead of arguing with Nathaniel, trying to prove why he was right in believing Jesus was the messiah, he did what is best. He said, "Come and see." Inviting people into relationships is the only way to destroy labels and break down the walls that we have erected that divide us from others. This is what happened with Nathaniel. You can almost view Nathaniel approaching Jesus, arms folded across his chest, scowl on his face and ready to do battle with this imposter. Jesus totally disarms him by saying, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathaniel response, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus replies that he saw him when he was sitting under a fig tree before Philip talked to him. To which Nathaniel says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" In meeting Jesus he went from close minded to open. From rejecting the idea that anyone of importance could come from Nazareth to believing Jesus was the messiah and he too became a disciple.

This is human relations weekend. It is a time in our country and in the life of the church to challenge people to step away from labels that separate us from one another. The way to do that is to be willing to dialogue and be in relationship with others. I hope you invite people to come to the Three Interfaith Amigos. If they want to argue with you about why this is wrong, ask them to come and see for themselves. If you have labeled people or groups, which then allow you to reject them, challenge yourself to try and be open to what they are saying. I am not telling you that they will change your mind but

once you are in relationship they become people instead of objects and love and compassion become the norm.

In closing let me share a brief personal story. Our first church after seminary was Bonners Ferry, Id. Many of the residents had very strong opinions about a lot of things. One of them was that anyone who listened to National Public Radio was a radical who should not be listened to for any reason. The passion against NPR was so great that they even tried to get the transmitter on the mountain shut down. One day I was having coffee with the guys and the rant about NPR began. One man said, "No one who listens to that station could be my friend!" I quietly said, "I am sorry to hear that. I guess you need to know that I listen to it and I am sorry this gets in the way of our friendship." He began to sputter a bit and finally said, "Well you are different. I know you."

Relationships and community, instead of labels; this is what we are invited to embrace as followers of Christ. Each of us is reminded to come and see what God can do in our lives.