

“Label Makers and Barrier Breakers”

Sermon by Marc Murphy

Sunday, October 25, 2020

Well today is that famous church holiday, Reformation Sunday. I am not too ashamed to admit that I didn't actually know that until I started to prepare for today and went to the UMC lectionary website. Reformation Sunday commemorates Martin Luthers nailing of the 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church on All Saints' Eve in 1519. It actually was a pretty big celebration by the Lutherans last year on the 500th anniversary of that event.

According to the Board of Discipleship web site, “it is important to note that the United Methodist Church is not actually part of the Reform Church.” Our origin is different. We of course come from the Church of England, which broke from the Roman church for different reasons than the Lutherans. An unhappily married and greedy monarch was the jumping off point for the Anglicans. So, again according to the website, we aren't actually a protestant church, we are part of the Anglo-Catholic tradition. It goes on to say that all this is probably not worth bringing up in a sermon because telling you that you aren't protestant could cause as they said, “undue stress”. But I did it any way because it's 2020, so what's a little more stress?

I bring this all up because it started me thinking about labels. Do we really care, or should we, whether we correctly bear the label protestant, or how about evangelical, or even Methodist?

Now I have always loved labels and label makers. I remember as a kid, we had one of those old label makers that you loaded with a reel of thick plastic ribbon. You would set a dial to the form one letter at a time, by squeezing the handle, and then the raised white letter would appear. I loved that thing because it reminded me of the phasers in Star Trek.

As humans we create labels for everything. We have an insatiable need to categorize and label things in order to understand their relationship to everything else we know.

And once something is labeled we pile all these preconceived notions and assumptions of what that thing is based on prior experience and knowledge of other things with the same label. But labels can box in our thinking, making us see things through the lens of the label with all those associated assumptions rather than seeing the thing, or the person, for what or who they actually are. Labels can be used to unite us or to divide us depending on the intention and emotional baggage with which we charge the label. While on the one hand labels can be so very convenient for helping us bring order to our world, labels are often the root, if not the very heart and soul, of prejudice and discrimination.

If we were to apply a label to John Wesley, for instance, we could say he was a conservative, a loyal Tory, which was the “God and country, law and order” political party of his day. He was a firm believer in the divine right of the monarch

to rule, and although he expressed sympathy with the complaints of the American colonists, he was dead-set against support for revolution. According to modern political labels, it would be hard to see John Wesley in the forefront of social justice agitation.

And yet, Wesley was one of the earliest and strongest opponents for the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. An institution so embedded in the British economy that the royal family had invested in slave trading companies and even the Church of England held a sugar plantation in the West Indies that utilized slave labor.

In Wesley's view, all humans are created in the image of God, and although fallen into sin and rebellion, all remain capable of accepting God's saving grace. In his treatise "Thoughts on Slavery," Wesley said, "If therefore you have any regard to justice, (to say nothing of the mercy, nor the revealed law of God), render unto all their due. Give liberty to whom liberty is due, that is to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature."

And he was not timid in following this line of thinking to its radical conclusion. Quoting from an article by Michael Gerson in the Washington Post, Wesley "...went so far as to justify slave uprisings, which he described as oppressed people "asserting their native Liberty, which they have as much right to as the air they breathe." He addressed slave owners, saying, "What wonder if they should cut your throat? And if they did, whom could you thank for it but yourself? You first acted the villain [when you enslaved them]..."

So we must be careful to not allow the labels others place on us or the labels we give ourselves to trap us into rigid thinking, to erect barriers between us and others, to avoid thinking about or even deny the injustices done to others because of preconceived notions of who they are, or who we are, based solely on labels.

These barriers that we build often use the basest of materials: fear, pride, and anger. We fear change, we fear the unknown, we fear "the other". And this makes us unwilling to consider their viewpoints, rushing to justify our views without actually even hearing the other side out. And our pride... It's difficult to admit your ideas about the world may need adjusting, that what you have always believed or assumed to be correct is faulty. I have often argued a point long after I knew I was wrong just to justify why I ever had the wrong idea in the first place. And when our pride is wounded, we often become angry, becoming obstinate and unwilling to listen or change.

So we have a problem with barriers. But the good news, as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians, "We are human, but we do not wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God." [2 Cor 10:3-5].

The church today finds itself at an impasse over moral issues. There are genuine legitimate disagreements and arguments to substantiate both sides. The barrier that has been built seems insurmountable.

But in an article in United Methodist Insight, theologian David N. Field states that he believes a major reason the church has had such a difficult time in moving forward on the LGBTQ issues that face us is that our theology of sin is not, as he puts it, “deeply Wesleyan.” In his argument, he explains that Wesley believed human beings are responsible before God for the way we live and we will have to account to God for our actions. Further we are required by God to act according to moral law. And yet, because we are merely human, our understanding of this law is finite, often mistaken, and confused. And finally, Wesley believed God will not require the impossible from us.

On this basis, Wesley made two proposals in developing his theology of sin. First he drew a line between what he called “sin properly so called” and “sin improperly so called.” Sin properly so called is when we knowingly violate the will of God and will therefore be accountable for that before God. But when our understanding of His moral law is confused or mistaken and we act in good conscience according to what we believe is just and moral and yet are unknowingly violating God’s law, that action is what Wesley would call sin improperly so called. In other words these actions are not conscience sins, but would nonetheless be covered by Christ’s atoning work.

Wesley’s second proposal was that God’s moral law was summed up perfectly by Christ in our reading from Matthew: love for God and love for our fellow humans. The individual choices we make in specific circumstances then are explications of what that love requires in those particular situations and relationships.

Field therefore proposes that it is possible for people to have very different interpretations of what moral law requires and still recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, “as people transformed by the Spirit and going on to perfection.” But we cannot rightly claim to be motivated by love while we knowingly perform actions that clearly have detrimental effects on the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of others.

So if labels that divide are all we see and notice, we will fall into the trap of separating ourselves from each other. Instead, we should take a step back and look at the bigger picture, focusing on our similarities and learning from our differences, even leveraging those differences to make us stronger.

So if I were to say that I believe in law and order, I would not want to be labeled as fascist, or as someone who cannot see disparities in the application of the law, or would not be willing to discuss sensible alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent crimes.

Or if I said I believe border security is essential to the sovereignty of a nation, I would not want to be labeled as a xenophobe, or as someone who wouldn’t support immigration reform to allow many more immigrants to legally enter our country.

Or if I said “black lives matter,” I would not want to be labeled as an anarchist fomenting violence in the streets or that I don’t believe all lives matter. It might simply be my way of honestly facing up to the systemic and personal racism that necessitates being reminded that liberty and justice for all is an ideal not yet achieved but still aspired to.

Or if I said I believe that everyone should be able to choose to enter into union with the life partner of their choice, I would not want to be labeled as a secular humanist who doesn’t value the sanctity and beauty of marriage union blessed by God, but simply to remember that three things will remain until the end of time: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.

The issues that face us as a local church, as a denomination, and as the worldwide church are disparate and will require radically different solutions. They will not be solved by timidity of spirit, they will not be solved by force. They can only properly be addressed by creativity, fearless reliance on God, and love ambitious enough to take on the seemingly impossible.

But if we allow our differences on solutions to these problems to pull us apart, we will have well and truly failed as a church and as Christians.

I’ll end on these words from Wesley’s Sermon 75:

To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians with whom we were before united is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us together, and the greater the love, the stricter the union. And while this continues in its strength nothing can divide those whom love has united. It is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. The pretenses for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause.