

LABELS

How many years and decades and centuries have we continued to think that in some way, shape or form, it is we, the metaphorically “circumcised,” who have the gift of God’s love, grace and mercy, and that those who are metaphorically “uncircumcised” are on the outside looking in?

How many times do we allow the labels and identifiers we use to limit us or to limit how we see others?

In our political arena, this is a time of stark contrasts. There are policy and political-orientation differences to be sure, but that is not what seems to be mostly driving the process that seems to be escalating division and enmity. The conversation is personal and negative and divisive in ways that seem unprecedented. If one person is a liberal or a Democrat and another person is a conservative or a Republican, it has become increasingly impossible to have public, civil dialog and argumentative discourse. When we think of argument, often we think of heated and angry exchanges. But “argument” also means a “set of reasons given with the aim of persuading others that an action or idea is right or wrong.”

To be in disagreement or to try to persuade someone does not have to carry anger or be a heated discussion, but we seem to have lost a lot of our collective ability to be in argumentative discussion. And social scientists tell us we are increasingly unwilling and unable to be persuaded about almost anything that is different than what we have settled on believing.

Almost four years ago, at the 2013 Clinton Global Initiative Conference, President Bill Clinton was being interviewed and he was asked about the nature of discrimination and intolerance in our society. I am paraphrasing President Clinton here, but in essence he said the following: “I think we are a more tolerant society today than in any time in our past. We are more tolerant racially and more tolerant in regards to gender and more tolerant in regards to sexual identity. The biggest problem facing us today is that we can’t stand to be in the same room with someone who disagrees with us.”

That was almost four years ago. How are we doing four years later?

How true is that for you personally? Do you have conversations with others who have different viewpoints? Socially? Politically? Theologically? I don't know about you, but I tend to gravitate toward friends who have similar lifestyles and beliefs and orientations to life.

Since starting Seminary two years ago, through my fellow students I am exposed to a far broader range of thought in most areas, although it is tricky to get them to directly express the differences. From the faculty, the range of thought expressed is less broad, but certainly different than what I have known. And this is a good thing because in that environment, in remembering and applying the higher and larger labels of "*fellow citizens with God's people*" and "*members of God's household*," I can more easily hear the "alternative thought," whatever that thought might be.

In considering Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, how hard is it for us to enter into the story of faithful Jews who were getting the message of God's redemptive work that had been done through Jesus of Nazareth? The hottest debate in those early days, and the debate that threatened to doom the Jesus movement to obscurity, was the debate about "who was in and who was out." We humans like to have labels to help us decide who is in and who is out. If you are a good Jew in the first century, what's a good label to figure out who is in and who is out? Paul writes in verse 11: "*Remember then your former condition, Gentiles as you are by birth, 'the uncircumcised' as you are called by those who call themselves 'the circumcised' because of a physical rite.*"

But Paul is convinced that the message of salvation – the good news – is not just for the Jews but also for *all people*. Jesus tells us the same thing in scripture. For a good Jew, even a good Jew who was now following Jesus and who was becoming what would become known as a Christian, one still had to follow the laws of Judaism, even if those laws were being "fulfilled" as Jesus told us. Paul writes in verse 14: "*For he is himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one, and in his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the barrier of enmity which separated them; for he annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace.*"

And now Paul is saying we welcome all the "uncircumcised" into fellowship with Christ Jesus, for that is what Jesus came to do. And if they are to be followers of this Messiah, that is what *they* must do. And if we are to be followers of this Messiah, that is what *we* must do.

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Who are the “uncircumcised” in your world? We all have those who we believe are on the outside looking in. Find those people in your life and consider how Paul and the early church thought about them.

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Today is Super Bowl Sunday. Did you know that about 116 million people in the United States are expected to watch the game today? Did you also know that there are probably about 56 million people attending church today? Hmmm ... God is getting lower ratings than the NFL, and they have not been doing too well lately.

We have so many ways to identify ourselves in this world. Let's chat with a couple of congregation members about that. I'd like to call up Tom Grabiell and Court Purdy.

Does this feel like you are being called to the witness stand? Good ... you are! Do you swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Tom was born in Minnesota, but as a long-time resident of Cobb County, Georgia, can you tell us about your football allegiance?

Court grew up in Boston. Can you tell us about your football allegiance?

Barbara Sawyer: As the official church clerk, can you please record the following?

I would like to ask each of you to give us your prediction for the final score and winner for today's Super Bowl. We will enter this into our official church records. Thanks, guys ... shake hands and may the best team win!

When the Super Bowl is over, I dare say Tom and Court will still be friends and will still be “brothers in Christ.” That is a small example of the identification labels that might seem silly to some. But in some portions of society, those labels are as important as life and death. Of course, in those cases, usually alcohol is involved too, but you get my point.

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What happens when “labels” get so contentious and generate so much fear that we begin to think we have to “stop the other side” and the differences of opinion degenerate to thoughts of the other side being the enemy?

The Rwandan Genocide is an example of such an escalation. In 1994, during a 100-day period from April to July, there were an estimated 1,000,000 Rwandans killed. As is always true, the backstory that leads up to this slaughter is long and somewhat complicated, but I am going to try to give a brief 35,000-foot overview.

Keep in mind a few points as we contemplate this story. As Africa was colonized by Europe, Christianity was introduced and became the predominant religion in most African countries. Rwanda was known as the “most Christian nation on the continent,” with over 85% of the population identified as Christian.

During the early nineteenth century, prior to colonization, there were primarily two groups living in the Rwanda. *The Tutsi* were the wealthy elites of society who mostly raised cattle. They were the minority, but had the most power. *The Hutu* were the average and common folks of society who were mostly farmers. They were the majority, but had little power.

It is critical to note that the distinction between Tutsi and Hutu was not ethnic or racial, but predominately economic, and there was fluidity of movement between these groups. A Hutu farmer could prosper and acquire cattle and become a Tutsi, and the opposite was possible as well.

The Germans were the first Europeans to colonize Rwanda, but after WWI, the treaty of Versailles took Rwanda away from the Germans and gave it like a gift to Belgium near the end of 1919. *Merry Christmas, Belgium.*

As the Belgians brought their fine organizational skills to the Rwandans, they began issuing “identity cards” in 1933 based on the socio-economic labels of Tutsi and Hutu. In addition, they also introduced some nonscientific tribal variation distinctions to these two groups, trying to link each group to different ethnic origins from differing regions of Africa. These distinctions were later found to be nonexistent, but they are critical to the story.

After the Belgium identity card program began, any kind of societal mobility became close to impossible, almost like a caste system, which exacerbated the potential animosity between the groups.

As the twentieth century progressed, the Hutu majority, which represented about 85% of the population, wanted to have more control and say in the government, and democracy seemed like a good vehicle for this. In 1962, Rwanda won its independence from Belgium and became a democratic republic. Many Tutsis left Rwanda and went north to Uganda and south to Burundi. However, there were plenty of Tutsis still left in Rwanda, and the Hutus thought that some day the Tutsis who had been removed from power might come back looking for revenge. The Hutu groups decided that if that ever happened, they would be ready and would kill all the Tutsis. The Hutus' fear of a Tutsi rebellion grew and grew over time.

On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying the Rwandan president was shot down, and the attack was declared by the Rwandan government as an act by the Tutsi rebellion. The genocide began the next day.

What is hard to fathom is the depth of the fear and the conviction of belief that consumed the Hutu majority. Over the next 100 days, about 1,000,000 Rwandan Tutsis were slaughtered. That is 10,000 people every day, 400 every hour, 7 every minute ... for 100 days. This is hard to fathom to be sure, but we live in a world that often can bandy about numbers with hardly a notice. Twenty million Soviet soldiers died in WWII. Six million Jews died in the Holocaust. Hundreds of thousands died in atomic bomb blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But what is so stark in contrast about this genocide is that on Thursday, April 7, 1994, a killing began not by the dropping of a bomb or by a military war machine, but mostly by neighbors killing neighbors face-to-face. When the genocide began, Rwanda was the most Christian nation on the continent of Africa. Four days earlier, on Sunday, April 3, 1994, most had worshiped together as Christians celebrating Easter Sunday. The Hutu majority armed themselves with machetes, clubs and blunt objects and set about to rape and kill their Tutsi neighbors and to destroy and steal their property. There are eyewitness accounts of Tutsis asking, as they were being beaten or hacked with a machete, "Why are you doing this to me, my brother?" But the fear and rage of the Hutu were too great for any answer other than death.

What does this tragic story have to do with us? That is something that happened long ago on another continent, and is something that could never happen here in the United States, right?

Have we been paying attention to what has happened in the past 16 days? This is not a political statement. The division and enmity are in forms both legal and illegal, and in some cases are overwhelming our ability to govern, protect and serve.

The Rwandan moment in history and our own national moment in history are powerful reminders to us all that labels and identifiers that are “of this world” ultimately will betray us and fail us. No matter our affinity or affiliation, if we elevate these labels above our true label given by God, we will fall ... we will fail ... we will die.

There is an answer to this problem. It requires a willingness to have “eyes to see and ears to hear.” It requires a willingness to surrender to a God who is active and present and able to transform hearts and lives and purpose. It can only happen to each of us individually, but we live it out together in a community of faith. That is why we have each other: to be on this path together. It also takes effort and intention and discipline on our part. We cannot treat the good news like “Mom’s spaghetti”: throwing it against the wall to see what sticks. We need to be in a community to help us work out this “new humanity” stuff together. And we need to have the courage to be in argumentative discussion when necessary. This is not a call to abandon, as unimportant or superfluous, the labels we use. It is a call to reflect on the prioritization and importance of those designations.

There is a lot of discontent and frustration and anger in our lives, in things big and small. Where, oh where is our hope?

“You were at that time separated from Christ, excluded from the community of Israel, strangers to God’s covenants and the promise that goes with them. Yours was a world without hope and without God. Once you were far off, but now in union with Christ Jesus you have been brought near through the shedding of Christ’s blood.”

I pray that I may be able to be in relationship with those who I think are part of the “uncircumcised,” for that is what Christ revealed to us, and more than anything, I want to follow Christ.

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“So he came and proclaimed the good news: peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near; for through him we both alike have access to the Father in the one Spirit. Thus you are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow-citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household.”

And I pray that I may remember that whatever label I might apply to myself or to others, I have a label that is not of this world. I am a *fellow-citizen with God’s people* and a *member of God’s household*. This label is more noble and higher than I deserve, but it is a label given to me by God. And it is your label also.

Amen.