

SERMON
July 20, 2008
“Labels”
By the Rev. Bill Fulton

When I was a student at Evergreen State College in Olympia, I decided one Sunday that I'd like to go to church. I can't remember what motivated me to go to church that Sunday, but I think I was looking for something spiritually. Since I was raised in the Methodist Church, I thought I'd try the big Methodist Church downtown Olympia.

Students from Evergreen State College are called “Greeners” by the local folks in town, and Greeners had a reputation as being pampered liberal hippy kids living in the woods.

I'm one of those people who would really rather not be recognized during the church service, and I always dread it when they get to that part of the service when they ask their visitors to stand up and introduce themselves. But I stood up and said, “I'm Bill Fulton and I'm a student at the Evergreen State College.”

The minister said, “Oh, you're one of those Greeners.” And I heard a little titter go through the congregation. Well, I can tell you I never went back to that church. Maybe I was a Greener, although I'd never asked for that label, but I felt like I ought to be accepted for who I was. Maybe some students at Evergreen were pampered liberal hippy kids living in the woods, but I didn't think that described me. I wanted to be accepted for who I was.

Labels.

Why is it that we label people and then just dismiss everyone with that label? It seems like we're becoming very adept at labeling people today. Liberals; conservatives. Red states; blue states. Pro-life; pro-choice. Orthodox; revisionists. Progressives; reactionaries.

Sometimes labels can be helpful when they serve to point out what is distinctive about a group. But often it seems like they're simply used to categorize people and then dismiss them with a sweep of the hand.

Why do we label other people? Sometimes we don't really want to take the time to really understand another person, so we slap a label on them and then we can. Sometimes I think we're afraid of the other person's position, so instead of trying to understand that position, we just label it and condemn it. And as a result, the world becomes more polarized and more divided.

But I don't want to be known by a label – I want to be known as a person. I want to be known for who I am. I think we all do.

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds. He says that a field is discovered to have weeds growing in among the wheat. When the workers find this out, they go to the owner and ask him, “How did these weeds get here?” He says, “An enemy sowed them among the

wheat.” They ask him, “Should we pull up all the weeds and get rid of them?” He says, “No. If you do that, you uproot the wheat also, and you’ll do more damage than good, just wait until the harvest, and then I’ll tell the reapers to gather the weeds and burn them, and then they’ll gather the wheat into my barn.”

Doesn’t that parable sound just like the situation we’re in? Some people say, “We’re the wheat, but those other people over there, they’re the weeds. We should separate them out.” But the other people say the same thing, “No, **we’re** the wheat and **they’re** the weeds. They’re the ones who should be separated out from us.”

When we label people, the next thing that happens is we try to get rid of them, and the result is almost always disruptive and destructive.

The owner of the field was very wise, wasn’t he? He said, “Don’t pull up the weeds, because if you do you’ll pull up the wheat at the same time. Let them grow together until the harvest, and then we’ll deal with it.”

Jesus was telling the disciples, “Don’t take it on yourself to uproot the garden. You’ll just cause more problems than you solve. Let the weeds grow along with the wheat. Let God be the judge.”

It was the Pharisees who wanted to separate out the wheat from the weeds. They felt that they were the pure one; they were the righteous, and they couldn’t be tainted by association with sinners. Remember the Pharisee who was in the temple praying, “O God, I thank thee that I’m not like that man, a tax collector and a sinner.”

And hasn’t that been the tendency of the church down through the ages? First we label someone, then we separate them out.

Some people have left the Episcopal Church because they feel the church has departed from the historic faith. They believe that inclusion of homosexual people in the church is an unforgivable sin. And I know in this church we’ve lost some people because they felt that the Episcopal Church was no longer pure enough for them. I sense that we’re still grieving about that. We have some sadness about our loss, some guilt, some anger towards the people who have separated themselves out from us. When you’ve lived and worshiped with someone for a long time, your roots grow together, and you can’t uproot one without hurting the other.

I’ll tell you this: the church is not the congregation of the righteous. We’re not the Hall of Fame for perfect people. We’re not the Academy Awards for saints. We’re a hospital for sinners. We’re wounded healers. We’re limping pilgrims. No one in the church is perfect, and we need to live with all those God has put us together with.

We’re all on a journey to God, and we’re all learning. One of the most important things I’ve had to learn as a priest is that I’m just like everyone else. No better, no worse, just struggling along on my journey to God. Just like everyone else, I’m a child of God.

In the Epistle today, Paul says, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” What a statement! ALL who are led by the Spirit of God.

Even people who are not like me, people who I don’t understand. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. Conservative people, liberal people. Male people, female people. People from other cultures, people who speak other languages, rich, poor, African, Asian, North American – all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. And Jesus tells us the ones we think are first will be last, and the ones we think will be last will be at the head of the line.

Paul says that when we pray, we cry, “Daddy! Father!” and that same Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.

The picture of heaven we have in Revelation is a great multitude of people from all families, tribes and nations, all praising God. There are no labels there, only the knowledge that each one is a child of God.