

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

What Label Do You Wear?

Based on James 2:1-10

My teenagers are teaching me a lot about style. When I was growing up, the only label to really pay attention to, was the one on the side pocket of your jeans. But teenagers are more sophisticated these days about labels. It's not just the brand of jeans you wear, but the brand of shoes you wear, or more important, the design year and colour of the shoe you are wearing, and the sports star who sponsored it. In the beauty department, the days of adding a little blush before class are over. Now, a full colour pallet is required by a popular makeup designer, purchased online, of course. No Shoppers Drug Mart here. I hesitate to tell you that even simple cotton undergarments are now part of the label game. Just in case the tiniest bit of cotton were to be seen when you were bending over in your locker, you need to make sure that the right designer label can be spotted on the elastic band holding things together. Some days, it's a difficult task to get the

trio out the door before noon!

Now, it would be easy for me to say that I don't get caught up in all that anymore, but I happened to find a Joseph Ribkoff shawl in the donations for the upcoming Rummage Sale next week, and was over the moon with my little treasure. So perhaps, I am not so immune to labels as I thought I was.

Labels are a part of our life: in our closet, in our kitchen, in our garage. It's nice to be able to throw around an impressive name brand at a dinner party. It's nice to reach a stage in life when you can afford nice things. It's nice to find a treasure at a garage sale that is way beyond your means and take it home with secret glee. Labels do affect us: about how we think about others, and about how we think about ourselves.

It would appear that the writer of James attended church on day, and was not

terribly impressed with what he saw. Sitting in his pew, praying quietly, waiting for the service to begin, he noted the way in which some entered the room with great pomp and circumstance, gold rings flashing, designer labeled clothing in full view. Then, just as worship was about to begin, a bit of a scuffle at the back door. Someone, dressed poorly, and obviously not part of the regular crowd, was quietly being removed or, told to sit out of the way, so as not to disturb the usual parishioners.

Was he a visitor looking to say his prayers like everyone else?

Was he homeless and cold, looking for a warm place to sit?

Was he a man down on his luck, hoping to ask if there was any work?

Was he a long lost relative of a member of the congregation, who had travelled all night, and hadn't had time to change before church?

We don't know. Nobody bothered to ask him. He looked different. He was unfamiliar. He didn't fit in. He didn't belong.

"You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet, (James 2:3b)

But the damage was done. The man had been labeled, and he was not in the 'in' crowd. The writer of James was not pleased.

It's easy to place labels out there in the world. You make note of where a person lives, what kind of car they drive, the cut of their clothes, and where they spend their free time. And then you categorize them in your mind, just where they fit into the spectrum of people and personalities. What you may not realize, is from that moment on, every interaction you have with that person, is seen through that lens.

We do the same thing in the church. And we don't like to hear that. We support local charities, donate food to The Mission, open our doors up on Sunday morning, and consider our efforts satisfactory. Job well done. And yes, it is good that we do these things. And thank God there are those in our pews who are passionate about our local needs and do something about it. But occasionally, we bump into the subtle, insidious labeling that come with being human. When we

are asked to help out in unfamiliar terrain, work with people that are not part of our private 'in crowd', or assist a family we don't know, the response, sometimes, is to pull back, or to hide behind the words, "they aren't part of the congregation," or "that's not something we are interested in." Unwittingly, we have labeled 'us' and 'them'. We're in, and they're not, be it people, organizations, global projects, or world peace.

Now before you all get defensive, understand this. James was struggling to get his congregations to understand the insidious nature of labeling thousands of years ago. It should be no surprise that churches today need to stay alert and aware of our human nature to sort people out, label them, and treat them differently. We say we don't, but in unexpected ways, we sometimes do. We must discipline ourselves not to get caught up in it.

The Solution?

The writer of James suggested this:

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right." (James 2:8)

If we were to look at each man or woman or child who crosses our path with the kind of love Jesus expressed in His ministry, then we would not see rich or poor, simple or sophisticated. We would not see our efforts to local charities simply as tasks to be completed, but as heartfelt gestures to change the world for good. We would see opportunities for new communities efforts, or helping people we don't know as an invitation for others to experience Christian love in the real life of everyday.

And if we allowed our self to soak up that same kind of love that Christ offers, then perhaps, we would not so readily believe the labels other have put upon us; that we would see ourselves as a delightful child of God,
"Fearfully and wonderfully made," (Psalm 139:14)

So how about a new label?
"Welcome...No I Really Mean it...Welcome"
"Helping Hands Here!"
"Hot Coffee"
"Free Smiles For the Asking!"

What new label are you going to wear?
Amen.

