

“Moving Beyond Labels”
1 Kings 17:8–16; Mark 12:38-44
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There have been many times over the years when discovering that I am a minister, a new acquaintance has asked, “What kind of minister are you?” I almost always reply, “Pretty good, I hope.” If pressed, I will use the “B” word, Baptist, but only with a long series of adjectives to qualify the term. I am not ashamed of our heritage, beliefs, and practice, but there are different kinds of Baptists and many attachments of meaning for the term. I don’t want to be labeled or pigeonholed. I want people to get to know me for who I am and what I believe.

None of us likes to be labelled, and even if a descriptive term is relatively accurate, we are never defined by one aspect of our being — tall or short; young or old; male, female, or non-binary; straight or gay; black, brown, or white; and the heavy item for this week — Republican, Democrat, or Independent. With every one of these labels, specific things come to mind that do not apply to us, even if we claim the descriptor in some way.

I know staunch Republicans who are LGBT-friendly and pro-choice. I know loyal Democrats who want balanced budgets and strong borders. And I know dedicated Independents, I suspect soon-to-be the largest cohort of our population, who are guided by clear principles and are very capable of making commitments. Labelling is an uninformed, destructive practice that deepens our national divisions and worsens the hostile mood. None of us likes it, but we are all tempted to do it.

Sadly, some of the greatest temptations to label come in regard to the most vulnerable people, those who feel beaten down already — immigrants and refugees, persons of color, LGBT people, people with mental health challenges and different abilities, people of minority faiths, the homeless and unemployed, indeed anyone in poverty. It's often not intentionally malicious, other than when politicians do it, it's just a function of mental laziness, but it is just as harmful.

This issue seems to be at work in two of our texts today, the two that refer to widows. All we have to do is hear the term and certain images come to mind. A widow is a poor old thing utterly defined by the absence of her husband. She is not to be exploited by people like the scribes Jesus dresses down in our reading from Mark; she is to be cared for, as called for in texts like James 1:27.

But does this describe all the people we know who have been widowed? There are widows and widowers, women and men who have lost spouses. They can be young and old, rich and poor and everywhere in between, much in need or stubbornly independent. Most importantly, while the loss of a spouse is devastating, each of these persons is more than one life experience.

Interestingly, the reading from 1 Kings leaves room for this insight, but most translations cover it up. Old Testament scholar David G. Garber, Jr., notes that the Hebrew refers to the person God sends the prophet Elijah to in Zarephath as a “woman, a widow.” But most translations simply say she is a widow (www.workingpreacher.org).

It is a tiny difference, seemingly insignificant, but there is a difference between saying someone is a blind man and saying he is a man with blindness. There is a difference between saying someone is a Jew and saying she is a Jewish woman. There is a difference between saying a person is a leper instead of a person with leprosy.

Translation matters. This woman, as Garber notes, is also a mother and now head of a household, and while she benefits immensely from Elijah’s help, he benefits equally from hers. God is the ultimate source of blessing, giving both the ability to survive a severe drought, but as God’s method of intervention requires human cooperation, both the prophet and the woman who has been widowed have to be involved.

She is no poor thing hiding away in a corner, though she does say she is preparing to die, but this is less resignation than acknowledgment of reality. Without divine intervention, she and her son will die. But as the story continues, it is obvious that she has some moxie, she does what Elijah asks, and the story ends happily. And it is worth noting that this story provides a wonderful illustration of the best kind of caring relationship, one which is mutual and involves empowerment.

We don't know as much about the woman who is a widow in the reading from Mark. Jesus contrasts her faith with the faith of the scribes. They strut around soaking in accolades for being important faith leaders while at the very same time they take advantage of widows financially and offer showy prayers while this woman places her last two coins in the offering plate. You can't be much of a faith leader with this level of hypocrisy. The woman sets a better example, even though she has no place of importance and never says a word in worship. At the very least, she too is more than the label "widow" might imply.

So, what is the message for us? Labelling people is an odious practice that sells them short and shrinks us in the process. When we put people in a box, we deny their potential, but we also deprive the community around them the opportunity to benefit from their gifts. I love a saying the former head of the School of Pastor Care in Winston-Salem, Dewey Hobbs, used often. Dewey had many memorable quips, but when church people would say "no" to a leadership role and claim not to have the abilities required, he would say, "Oh, you have face cards in more than one suit." It is a wonderful insight. Everyone has an array of gifts. Thus, no single label can define our worth.

But how can we get past this tendency and start seeing people for who they are, for who God has made them, like Jesus does with so many people? It begins with a willingness to examine some of the biases and prejudices that drive us to label.

I will never forget a conversation Sam Harrell had with some of the youth in the church I served in Richmond, Virginia. Sam and his wife Mel later became CBF field personnel in Kenya where he grew up (and she in nearby Uganda), and later head of all CBF field personnel, but at this time he was finishing a graduate degree and beginning their non-prophet Africa Exchange.

After his presentation, there was time for questions, and one of the youth asked, "How can you live in a such an uncivilized country (referring to Kenya)?" You could see the steam boiling up inside Sam. "Uncivilized?!" he said, "Our children speak three languages by the time they are in third grade, and we don't put our elderly people away in

homes!” He went on to explain both of these statements in gentler fashion, but a sharp-edged first response was warranted, in fact, needed to get the attention of those young people who were wonderful but also a reflection of the adults there and in many churches in this country.

We can be so arrogant about our presumed strengths and condescending toward other cultures. Those poor people in Africa... or worse, those dangerous people in Africa... First, it is a massive continent with incredible diversity. Second, it has ancient cultures with some traditions better than ours, like the emphasis on community over self-interest. And even among the poorest of the poor, there is so much courage, creativity, and resiliency that we should stand in awe.

Yet we struggle to fight back the tendency to hear a reference to any African nation and make negative judgments about the person. We may not be as overt as some national leaders who spew incessant ignorance and hatred, but deep down we still attach meaning, often wrong or at least inadequate, to one label, and dismiss the value of the child of God standing in front us. It is an insult to them and to God, and a disservice to our community. We will never move beyond this tendency until we recognize the biases and prejudices we have.

We also need to have the discipline to leave room for more than what we might at first see in other people. If my internship in state parole over forty years ago taught me nothing else, it taught me to suspend judgment on people. There were always different perspectives on any person or story, and the truth was usually more complicated than any one of them. I learned to listen and hold off on establishing firm opinions until I heard more about anyone or anything.

I have had similar experiences with MDiv students I have mentored over the years. We all change and grow over time. Some of these students seemed so quiet at first that they were afraid of their own shadows, but over time they developed powerful voices in their ministries, not necessarily increasing in volume literally, but making a difference with their courage and insight, presence and compassion.

I have had parallel experiences with many congregants who have been identified in a certain way with specific gifts but who have had so much more to offer, sometimes surprising themselves. I remember a

bank executive in one setting who served on the finance committee and as a deacon, but when the deacons developed a ministry plan, he didn't think he could offer anything. Yet, over time, he joined the hospital visitation team, and not only became one the best lay visitors in that church but found deep meaning in that service. He had face cards in more than one suit. We should never sell anyone short, not even ourselves.

But even Jesus was labelled. He didn't study with any of the prominent rabbis whose teaching was the equivalent of modern-day theological education. He travelled around, teaching and healing, but was looked upon with scorn by the religious establishment. He was an outsider, a nobody, a troublemaker. His message had political overtones, though he tried to distance himself from politics, but he had no army to effect change. When they came for him in the night, he made sure his disciples put up no resistance, though it wouldn't have made any difference. And then, he was put to death on a cross like a common criminal. The authorities who were responsible thought he was weak and ineffectual. They were done with him, end of story.

But, of course, they were wrong — wrong about every label they attached to him, wrong about his true character, wrong about the ongoing impact of his ministry which endures to this day. But before we grow too smug in our assessment of them, we need to acknowledge that we continue to label Jesus to this day — radical, unrealistic, irrelevant, too soft on sinners, and still weak — and we continue to get it wrong. When will we learn to quit labeling and putting people into boxes? When will we learn that judgment belongs to God? When will we see people, beginning with Jesus, for who they are in God's eyes? It will be a glorious day for us all when we do!