

“Tags”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
World Communion Sunday
October 4, 2020

Scripture Reading: 1st Corinthians 1:10-17

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.



Sermon: “Tags”

In our scripture reading for today, Paul tells the Corinthians to “Be in agreement and [let] there be no divisions among you, that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.” Now Paul is trying to make an important point about unity in the church but I fear what you are hearing is a call to uniformity. That line about there being “no divisions among you” sounds like really good advice for our day and time. But, are we always supposed to be in agreement? And have the same mind? And the same purpose? That sounds like it could be easily misunderstood.

So, let me just clear that up right here in the beginning. No, Paul isn’t saying that we are supposed to agree on everything. God made us all different with complex brains capable of creativity and thought and reflection, and God gave us varied experiences that have molded and shaped us in dynamic, interesting ways. I can’t imagine that God intended such diversity of thought and experience to result in complete uniformity.

What Paul means here is that we should be in agreement and of the same mind and purpose as it relates to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and allowing ourselves to be instruments in the building of God’s Kingdom. Those two priorities should be shared among all Christians. But in all other things we are unique, thoughtful individuals.

Now that we’ve got that out of the way, we can focus on what Paul really means for us to focus on: Tags. Tags that describe us; tags that say something about who we are; some we choose and some that are chosen for us. And the problem for Paul is that the Corinthians are getting lost in all those tags and forgetting the one tag that actually matters most: The one that defines us as “Children of God.”

We live in a culture that often tries to reduce us to a single trait; one thing that defines *us*. We see that most clearly in the political realm where you’re often categorized as either conservative or liberal. Yet most people are not absolutely either. Most of us tend to be conservative on some issues and liberal on others and generally a mix of things across the board. But it takes more effort to explain or understand a nuanced position like that, and nuance is something we don’t always take time for. So, we tend to reduce people to one tag. It’s easier. It’s also lazy.

Today there is a pronounced tendency to define one another in terms of how we feel about our president. People seem to either love him or hate him, and where we stand on that question can, for some people, overshadow every other aspect of who we are. Truth is, people are actually a gooey mixture of complex and diverse traits and abilities and beliefs and preferences. You can’t reduce them to one single defining characteristic. We have lots of tags.,

Whenever I buy clothes, I make a game of trying to find all the tags so I can remove them. One of my worst fears is walking around in a new pair of pants with a sticker on the back telling everyone else walking down the street that I am “100% cotton for amazing comfort and breathability!” There’s usually a tag clipped to the pocket, another hanging from the

beltloops, and a sticker of some sort down one side. That doesn't even include the tags inside with the manufacturers name and the washing and care instructions. That's a lot of tags. Which is just like people. We all have a lot of tags and to understand who someone is, you have to read them all ... not just one.

Now, my son Harry *hates* tags. Whenever we put a new shirt on him that has a tag in the neck, he always asks for scissors so we can cut it out. And I can understand. I've had new shirts that when I put them on it felt like the tag was made out of porcupines and sewn in with barbed wire. Like clothing tags, our tags can be irritating, but they can also be helpful. Our tags identify our strengths and weaknesses, our likes and dislikes, the groups to which we belong and the myriad of personality characteristics we possess. Sometimes we choose our own tags like when we cheer for a team or join a club. Some tags are chosen for us, like race, country of origin, and sexuality. We may be omnivores or vegetarians or vegans. We may be cat people or dog people. We may be comfortable with technology or not so much. We are teens or "tweens" or gen x-ers or baby boomers or any number of other generational tags. Some tags we proudly wear and others we try to hide or avoid. And those tags, for better or worse, help others to understand a little bit about who we are.

But here's the thing: our tags help to describe us, but they do not define us. What does define us is our identity as children of God. That's the tag that matters more than all the others. We are defined by the fact that God created us and nurtures us and loves us enough to suffer all the worst that the human race is capable of, even death on a cross, to live as one of us, to experience the depth and breadth of human experience, and to save us from sin and death. We are defined by God's willingness to love and forgive and accept us, not because of who we are and what we do, but in spite of it.

We are defined by our connection to God through Jesus Christ. As author Richard Hays writes "Any attempt by the community to define itself in other terms will promote schism in the church and make our actions into a ridiculous parody of the faith we confess."¹ And that's important to remember when we have a difficult time understanding people who wear different tags than ours, whether that's political parties or college football teams or anything else. We are all children of God. Ultimately, that is the only tag that matters.

Celebrating communion is an expression of that truth. No matter where you are from, or what language you speak, or what your race or gender or sexuality; no matter how much money you have or what you believe or what news channel you watch, you are welcome at God's table. And when we come to God's table we are coming together as the family of the children of God. There are no strangers here, no outsiders. All tags are welcome.

In a literal sense, communion is a physical re-enactment of the Lords Supper when, on the night he was arrested, Jesus sat at a table with his disciples and fellow travelers and celebrated an even older event of significance, the Passover of God. But at its heart, communion is a community meal. When we eat the bread and drink of the cup, we do so not as individuals or members of any group, but as members of God's family; we do so recognizing that the people next to us in the pew or behind us in the intinction line are just as much sinners as we are, and that they are just as much children of God as we are, too. Whatever tags we wear, that is the only one that matters. As we eat and drink, we do so recognizing our connections with God and all of God's people everywhere in the world. There are no strangers here. All tags are welcome.

In an increasingly divisive world, where people with power use all the wrong tags to their own advantage, and where we are tempted to draw lines around our communities and let in only the people wearing the right tags, Paul reminds us that there is only one tag that matters. That is our blessing, and that is also our challenge.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

¹ Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians*. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997. 25. Print. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.