

6/24/2007  
Luke 9:18-24  
Galatians 3:23-29

A tragic tale from the annals of adolescence and a record of what a royal “meanie” I was in high school. I will never forget the day that Erin walked into my AP English Classroom at Enid High School. She was a new student, had just moved to lovely downtown Enid, Oklahoma from San Antonio, Texas. At first glance, she was drop dead, Texas beautiful. There was voluminous, bleached blond hair-sprayed hair, big loopy silver earrings, a mini-skirt and designer top. She did not look like the regular girls in my Advanced Placement class, with their nerd-niftiness outfits and odd assorted, grungy plaids that defined the early to mid 1990's. Erin took a seat by my friend Jenny Bernstein, and the class continued with our lesson about Arthur Dimmesdale, the adulterous minister, in *the Scarlet Letter*.

But something struck me as odd as I looked back at Jenny and Erin. The two, though they were very different, seemed to be getting along. Jenny was the smartest person in our class and a good friend, but to put it gently, she was a bit more bookish than young Erin. As I looked at them, I sensed something different in Jenny's posture. Jenny, I thought, desperately wanted to be Erin's friend. I knew then and there that something was foul in the state of Enid High. And the two were immediately best friends. Equally as fast, as was predictable, Erin was elevated in social rank from typical AP'er to bonified popular. She was too pretty not to be befriended and boyfriended by the best, though not necessarily brightest, girls and boys of the school. And the odd thing was that Jenny went along for the ride. This girl who had been a rarity in such lofty social circles was suddenly involved in all the gossip, the scandals, and the fun. She even had a new football playing boyfriend.

Those of us who were left behind in the nerd camp grew a little frustrated by the new arrangement. We felt sold out, sent down the river, and kept from Jenny's life, as though Jenny had just been waiting for an opportunity to break away. And so, me and some of my other nerdy friends proposed a bit of a Judas move, a test to see where Jenny's true loyalties. It was decided that we would make up a story, a story that was meant to be confidential. We would then tell Jenny under the strictest of confidence our “secret.” We reasoned that if she blabbed the news to her new friends, we would know she was no longer *our* friend. On the appointed day, we meanly, and cruelly told Jenny that the girl I was dating was “in trouble.” Now I should add that this was physically impossible with Holy Spirit intervention, and that my girlfriend was in on the joke. And we told only Jenny. Sure enough, Jenny took the bait, blabbing the “expectant” news all over school. Cheerleaders were suddenly consoling me about “my trouble”, and I even received literature in my locker about a certain clinic in Kansas that was the subject of much controversy at the time. We thought we had revenge, but in the end, we did not. We only proved how mean we were. Looking back, I am horrified, a little amused, and mostly sour about our behavior. Jenny was mean to us, we were ruthless to Jenny, and we were all trapped in the same system, a hierarchy in which some children were labeled as better than others, and some of those children were willing to hurt one another for personal gain in that system.

The fact is, labels in high school are important. That much is not news. Congratulations to high school graduates. You made it through. But the scarier thing is that they are still important in all of our lives. Progressive, conservative, rich, poor, fundamentalist, ugly, pretty, fat, slim, glamorous, cow, terrorists. Labels are a way of defining who a group is and that sometimes can be helpful. But more often, labels are used to exclude others. I imagine that each of us, either now or in our past, has felt like an outcast from a certain group that we wanted to join. And this reality, this phenomenon of labeling, what labels are used for, and how we react to them, is what I would like to talk about today.

The ancient world also had a proclivity toward labeling. In today's epistle, or letter, to the Galatians, Paul addresses this very phenomenon. He writes at a time when the church is attempting to define itself, its own adolescence and search for independence. And in its moment of definition, the church is wrestling with the question: Should we, as Christians allow people who are not Jewish or simply stay as a Jewish movement? For most of us in modern times, the issue seems mute, trite, and old. But this issue was absolutely THE issue of the early church, and it should be important to us because it shows us that early Christians were grappling with how to define themselves with or without excluding others. In Galatia, the first missionaries told the early Christians that they should be Jewish (in other words, they were willing to exclude Gentiles). Well, that's not completely true. They were willing to allow Gentiles, but only if they were circumcised, and even then, they were treated as second class citizens in a separate but not equal system. Right there in the early church, suddenly, there was an out group and a snipped group.

Paul recognized what was at stake. He railed against the practice. He realized that if we began to think in labeling labels, defining who is in and who is out, then there was nothing new about Christianity. It would have no power to change the world or reach out to those in need. And so Paul writes this letter. In it, he claims, that Jesus rose from the dead to show us that everyone, even the people who killed Jesus, are beloved children of God, and that being children of God is the only label that counts. And Paul says, "... for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ."

When most of us hear this passage, it seems sweet and a touch precious. But what Paul is writing is revolutionary because he is confronting how we divisively label. And Paul is trying to completely reorganize how we interact. He cuts to the chase. He understands that our tendency to label comes from our own insecurities and perhaps even our mistaken understanding that God labels and judges us. And more importantly Paul comprehends that such insecurities and projections only divide us, lead us to revenge, to lying, to pain... like my own story. And wanting to avoid those realities, Paul is desperately tries to make us secure, telling us that we are beloved children of God, and telling us that the only label that matters is how God sees us, and God sees us as created in God's image and "one in Christ Jesus."

Unfortunately, and let's be honest, sometimes, it feels good to make fun of people, to label them. It feels self-satisfying. Sometimes it might appear to be more fulfilling than being unified as children of God. And the people might be bad people! But in the end, we have to realize that we

are not only denigrating others when we label, we are denigrating our own selves. When we see the world through labels, we will eventually see ourselves through them, and we will loathe ourselves as a result because none of us can ever be so easily defined.

The fact is, Jenny was trapped by the same system that I was. We were both insecure and wanting to belong. We are all trapped in that system. But there is a way out. God is inviting me, Jenny, is inviting all of us, even in our brokenness, even in our faults and “troubles” to a new form of unity, a banquet where we are all invited and all serve as hosts to one another, a place where we are one with God and one another. Each week, we get a foretaste of that banquet in communion, where all are invited to share in the person of God. But ultimately, the goal is for the world, not just this table, not just this place, to look like that banquet and to serve one another. The Bread of Heaven. The Cup of Salvation.