

It has been fascinating, and, I must add, less than inspiring and encouraging to observe the political debate in our culture lately. As some very important topics have been raised it seems that some of us deal with the disagreements that those topics cause by the use of dismissive labels. Ah, she is a right winger. Oh, he is a socialist. The labels seem to solve everything. We know who is in and who is out. We know who is for us and who is against us. It's a nice, neat system; it really is.

I have this feeling that this system is not particularly new. It seems to be a system that human beings have lived within forever. Just look at the gospel lesson for today. One of the chief disciples, John, said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us, i.e., he is not one of us." You see there is we and they, us and them. It's just the way life is.

Some of the people of Israel must have thought the same thing, as our first lesson for the day demonstrates. God had responded to Moses' whining and complaining about Israel's whining and complaining by deciding to give Moses some helpers. Seventy elders were given to assist Moses in dealing with a large nation of bratty kids who were tired of a very long road trip. Moses then would no longer be the only one who spoke on behalf of God. There would be other prophets. These other prophets gathered together at the meeting tent and God gave some of the spirit of Moses to them. Well, evidently, two men, Eldad and Medad, didn't show up for the meeting. But they started prophesying anyway. Joshua, the man who would eventually assume Moses' role, urged Moses to stop these renegade prophets.

They are not us. Stop them, Moses. You see, there is we and there is they, us and them. It's just the way life is.

And Moses, somehow recovered from his self-pity party, said, "Are you jealous for me; afraid I can't handle this? I wish that all of God's people were prophets."

You see, there is we and there is they, us and them. It's just the way life is. And Jesus, reflecting the spirit of Moses, said, "Not in my world is it this way. This guy who is casting out demons in my name, let him do it. I know you are mad because it wasn't too long ago that you failed at casting out a demon. It's tough when you can't do the job, and then it's tougher when somebody who is not a part of your club ends up doing it, especially when you have been talking about who is the greatest. The man is doing a good thing. I mean, are you opposed to people being set free? And what's more, no one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. If he's not an enemy, he's an ally (Peterson, **The Message Bible**). Whoever is not against us is for us."

"No, no, no," we protest. Whoever is not for us is against us. It's much neater that way. I mean how will I know who I am if I do not know who I am not. I am not like one of them. I am not like the neighbors. I am not a Republican, a right-winger, a Democrat, a liberal, a Socialist, a Baptist, a Catholic, a fundamentalist, a Jew. Who am I? I am not really sure. But I am not they. That I know for sure. How else can I justify my place in the world if I don't make it quite clear who and what I am not?

I remember an experience with an older woman from the former church that I served—an older woman whom I still consider a friend. We still get letters from her updating us on the weather and other

happenings in Toledo. The experience I am recalling happened after one of our worship services. This service had been a meditative kind of service, utilizing a lot of chant. Following the service, my friend came up to me, visibly angry. “We are not Catholic,” she said to me, with a passion that was quite pronounced.

I understood some of my friend’s passion. I mean, I had grown up with a grandfather who had a great deal of hatred for Catholics, even though he was married to one and most of his children and grandchildren were Catholic. But don’t confuse him with the facts. He wouldn’t go to the weddings of his grandchildren because they were held in Catholic churches, although admittedly he never went to any Protestant churches either. But again, don’t confuse him with the facts. He knew who he was not. He was not Catholic.

I also remember another experience I had in my previous church. This was with a kind older gentleman who really loved the church. We had begun using testimonies in our worship, faith stories. And frankly, our worship was becoming quite lively, with clapping and a few a-mens scattered throughout the service. And what’s more, we also started sponsoring an annual Revival. Well, my older friend came to me one day and said, “This is becoming Peace Baptist Church; we are not Baptist.”

Now don’t get me wrong. I have a strong sense of my Lutheran identity. I really like being Lutheran. But for me being Lutheran is not a matter of not being something else. I told my friends that I didn’t mind them critiquing things but I urged them not to critique on the basis of the argument of who we are not. Because something is Catholic or Baptist doesn’t make it bad. I don’t need to keep “them” out because they are not we. Whoever is not against us is for us.

I really have the sense that at the heart of the human struggle in relationship, especially to the other and the different, lies in our need to define ourselves as who we are not. We have a place because we are not they. We are okay because at least we are not like them. And “them” is given a label and that takes care of that, once and for all.

As I was speaking a couple of days ago to Dawn, our secretary, about these thoughts, she brought up the role that fear plays in all of this. I thought that was especially insightful. We often can be afraid of the other, afraid of the different. Keeping them “them” and us “us” means I don’t have to go to the scary place. I don’t have to leave behind the familiar. I don’t have to do the hard work that comes with the realization that life is much more complicated than our labels or our categories will ever reveal. The problems of this culture are too deep to be solved by one set of ideas. Oh, but that is scary. You don’t know how long these ideas have shaped me. You don’t know how long knowing who the enemy is has helped me have a place. I am not he. We are not they.

I think we need a different starting point than who we are not. I think Moses and Jesus operated out of a different starting point. How else could they say: “Do not stop **them**! Oh that all of God’s people were prophets. Whoever is not against us is for us?” These guys began from a different starting point. They operated out of a different world.

For Christians, the starting point is not who we aren’t, but rather who we are. We are the baptized. We are the ones who have been claimed and named. We are the ones who have a place, have a home, have a status. We are the ones who have died with Jesus. We are the ones whose fear and self-centeredness were drowned in the waters of baptism. We are the ones who have been raised to new life, life that

isn't just about us and our world view. We are the ones who are neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. We are not defined by who we aren't, but who we are. And who we are is loved, secure, freed from ourselves and from our fear. Who we are is united.

So, God, bring on the other. Bring on the different. Unsettle my little controlled world. Get me beyond labels. Take me to the deeper and, yes, messier place.