

November 4, 2012 - Jesus and the Labelled

We've been working our way through the Gospel of John and started with a little activity at the beginning of each of our lessons where we go through, chapter by chapter and try and put one little short phrase or a couple of words to memory for each of the chapters so that down the road as we think of different stories or want to look something up, we'll kind of have a road map for John's Gospel built into our minds. So this first slide we've gone through several times, so as we go through, say it out loud if you know what it is. I will move through the first few fairly quickly and then on to a few new ones for this week. Chapter 1 - Word became flesh; Chapter 2 - Water into wine; Chapter 3 - Nike at night, that's the story of Nicodemus; Chapter 4 - Woman at the well; Chapter 5 - Bubble bath, the lame man by the side of the pool; Chapter 6 - Two of them; first of all Feeding of the 5,000 and then Walking on water; Chapter 7 - Teaching at the Temple; Chapter 8 - Scribbling in the sand; These are all new. Chapter 9, which is where we're going this week - Blind from birth; Chapter 10 - The good Shepherd, probably a phrase or a story you're familiar with; Chapter 11 - Lazarus come out, where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

I hope as we go through these each week some of these are starting to sound familiar and ring true and if nothing else, you can keep the Bookmark in your Bible and have it for easy reference there later.

I remember when I was a kid, we used to have a label maker and it was one of those ones with the plastic strip and you had to set the dial and squeeze it and kind of punch the letters through the strips. My brother and I thought that was a toy. My parents disagreed. They didn't think it was a toy and now that I'm a parent, I realize that looking back I probably would have gone through rolls and rolls of this thing just punching random letters into it. I understand why that wasn't so much a toy back then. So that's what we used to have. Today they kind of have an upgrade and there's this whole new market of label makers and they can come in different sizes. Some are quite huge and now it's more laser printers and they print onto labels that you can stick to different things. I imagine most of us know someone or have heard of someone who has one of these label maker things for a birthday or for Christmas and they started out and they were really excited and so they started labelling things. They got a little obsessed with the labelling and they started to label pretty much everything in sight. They would start out and they'd start labelling containers, which made sense. And maybe some jars with their spices or maybe some different things, their toys and their buckets of stuff. All that made sense but then they would start to move on to things that really shouldn't be labelled. Like labelling individual pens and pencils, each one, pen, pen, pen,....Or they'll go and get stuff that already has a label on it and they'll print a label to put on top of the label on the thing that already has a label. Or sometimes, they get really carried away and they just start labelling things that shouldn't be labelled. Now, I made this up ahead of time, but I will confess that I chuckled, cause I was sitting at the back there earlier and I looked around and I saw one of our children who had a tag printed right across his forehead. Now, I'm going to assume that he probably did that to himself, but

nonetheless, people get carried away and they start labelling all sorts of things and things that really never should be labelled.

Maybe you've heard of the wedding tradition. Labels do have their place and here's why, the tradition where when a couple gets married you go over and fill up their pantry with all sorts of canned goods for them. Now, that's what you do if you're nice. If you're a little something else, you fill up their pantry with canned goods and then you take all the labels off and so when they come home they have this whole pantry full of cans, but they don't really know what any of them are. Every night when they make their supper they have to guess what tonight's side dish is going to be. Is it going to be spinach, or spaghetti's. Is it going to be tomatoes or tune. Is it going to be the creamed corn or the cranberry sauce. Is it going to be the peas or the pumpkin pie filling. As you can imagine, depending on which can you grab, your meal could turn out quite differently. Now, that's why labels do have their place. There is a purpose for labels. There is a time and a place that we should use them. And labels are really great because labels allow us to very quickly identify and categorize items, which in turn helps us understand what we are supposed to do and how we are supposed to interact with those certain items. If you find a drawer that's marked 'toys' you know that the things in this drawer are things you're supposed to play with. If you find a drawer that's marked 'silverware' you know that the things in this drawer are things that you eat with. If you find a drawer that's marked 'tools' you know that inside this drawer are things to help you fix stuff. If you find a drawer that's marked 'phone book' you know that in this drawer is a book that gives you a number to call someone, to fix the stuff that you tried to fix with the stuff from the tool drawer.

And so the labels kind of help us to identify and categorize and to help us to know how we're supposed to interact with certain things. Which I think is why I find it so tempting at times, to label people, because it does the exact same thing for me. It allows me to quickly identify and categorize people which in turn helps me to understand how I'm supposed to interact with that person. So, if label someone and say 'she's sporty'. Then I know right off the bat that I should talk to her about the Riders or about the NHL lockout or whatever. If I label someone and say 'he's a jerk'. Then I know, stay away from that guy. If I label someone 'she's a whiner' then I know, ignore her. If I label someone 'he's a big spender'. Then I know, hang out with this guy a lot and kind of get to know him a little big. If I label someone and say 'she's rude'. Then I know, don't take it personally when she blurts something out. If I label someone and say 'this guy is creative', then I know this is the person I go to when I need some new ideas. Some fresh ways of thinking. If I label someone and say 'she's grounded', then I know that I go to her for some practical solutions. And all of that is good and helpful to a degree, but it seems like it's so easy for a label to quickly become an identity. The problem is that, no matter how well I have nailed the label that I've applied to a person. There is more to that person than the label that I have given them. You see, labels are very one-dimensional and people are not. To define a person with a label is like calling a Swiss Army Knife a bottle opener. Now, can a Swiss Army Knife open a bottle, sure, but is there more to that picture, definitely there is. That's what

happens when we apply labels. You know, when I'm having a conversation with someone I don't know, I'm just kind of meeting them for the first time and getting to know them, there's one question that I try to avoid and put off for as long as I possibly can. You want to guess what that question is? My Job? Yes! What do you do? That is the question that I try to avoid and stall and put off for as long in the conversation as I can. Because what happens is, and when I'm having the conversation and I try to re-direct them when they talk about something, but I make sure that I avoid saying anything that might lead them there. First of all, I never ask, what do you do? Because the social etiquette says they come back and ask me, so whenever the conversation starts leaning that way, I try and steer it away in another direction. It's not because I'm ashamed of what I do or because I'm embarrassed about being a Christian. The problem is that, as soon as people know that I am a minister at a church, I am instantly labelled with whatever notion of priest or tele-evangelist, or podium pounding preacher that they have experienced in the past. That's not always a label that I particularly want to wear.

I remember Lynn Anderson saying one time that, if he was on a plane and the passenger next to him was particularly chatty, he says "If I feel like chatting with them I'll tell them I'm a writer. And if I feel like no conversation at all, I'll tell them I'm a preacher and that pretty much ends the conversation right there."

Some of you know Randy Harris, he's a well known author and speaker in Christian circles and Randy has a gold cross that he wears on a chain and he also almost always dresses in solid black. So, solid black with a cross on a chain gives a particular look to a person and so Randy often jokes when he's in certain situations he has this discussion inside his head of whether he should go 'cross in' or 'cross out'. Because if he puts the cross out, people see him and they have a certain expectation of him and immediately they label him with that. Sometimes he's in the mood for the conversation and sometimes he's rather kind of keep to himself.

Nine times out of ten, as soon as I tell someone what I do for a living, what my job is, the conversation gets a little less free; a little more awkward; they start apologizing profusely for every little off coloured word that might slip out of their mouth. Really what happens is, they stop being themselves and they stop being open. But, if we can put that question off for long enough, if we can get to know each other enough before that dreaded question comes up, then though minister is what I do is not labelled as the entirety of what I am and our relationship can grow and develop in a much better kind of way.

Now, we all label people from time-to-time, I think. We label people for easy handling instead of taking the time to discover who they really are. So we will label people and say: He's a divorcee; or she's an alcoholic; or he's just bitter; she's kind of a stick in the mud; he's just all about the money; she's a nay-sayer; this person is a crusty conservative who only cares about making sure we do everything exactly the way we've done for the last hundred years; or this person is a laid-back liberal who cares about everyone getting to do whatever it

is they feel like doing. Now labels may or may not be somewhat accurate, but they are always incomplete.

Most of you should have a name tag on this morning. I asked everyone to put on a name tag as you came in this morning and I hope you were able to do that. Now, I imagine, I'm assuming that most of you were comfortable with that experience of putting your name on this morning, of identifying yourself by name. But, what if I asked you, this morning, what if I have a second set of labels up here and said "Okay instead of your name, I don't want you to put your name on that tag, I want you to put one word that will describe who you are? How many of you will feel quite as comfortable with that? I was thinking "What would I put on, maybe something like 'brilliant' or 'gorgeous' or 'humorous' or 'quick-witted'. I don't know why gorgeous was followed by humorous, there might have been a little sub-conscious thing going on there. But the problem is that, even if those labels are positive things, they're hard to accept because, sure, I may be ruggedly handsome, but I'm more than just a pretty face. Now, who of you would be willing, to label yourself with one word? Anyone brave enough to do that? Now, second question. Who of you would be willing to wear a label that I gave you? A label that I picked out from my little batch up here and assigned you. Now, bear in mind, this is hypothetical, bear in mind that if this label was something that I could put on you and it would stick to you and when people saw you, they would know that this label is the first impression that people are going to get of who you are. This is going to be tied to your identity. So, I have a batch of label up here, things like klutz; lazy; absent minded; grumpy; failure; untrustworthy. I have a couple 'kind' and 'forgiving' ones in here too just to balance things out. Now, how many of you would be willing for me to come along and just decide; I'm going to give you this label and stick it on you? Wow! We have some very brave people here or you actually think there's a catch and I'm going to put something nice on. Now, most of us are a little reluctant in that notion. Most of us wouldn't be willing to let us select a label and put it on us, especially if once that label is applied, it will be the foundation of the first impressions of your personality and character. Now, most of us wouldn't be willing to accept wearing that kind of I.D. tag, but, we do that to other people all the time. Now the label might not be quite as visible, the tag is not so tangible but the effect is essentially the same.

And that is a lot of what was going on in our story this morning here in John, Chapter. Now, we're going to read out of John, Chapter 9 in just a second here. So if you have a Bible and want to read along you can turn to that. Now, I don't usually read really long passages of scripture during our sermon time, but this morning I'm going to because I think we need to watch this story unfold in it's entirety. So, as we read, here's what I want you to do. I want you to pay attention to the story and to the blind man in the story and see the various ways that people view this man and the labels that they try and place upon him as our story develops. I'm going to read in John, Chapter 9: 1-38: (NLT)

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. "Rabbi" his disciples asked him, 'why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his

parents' sins?" "It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. We must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work. But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world." Then he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man's eyes. He told him "Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam" (Siloam means "sent"). So the man went and washed and came back seeing! His neighbours and others who knew him as a blind beggar asked each other, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said he was and others said, "No, he just looks like him!" But the beggar kept saying, "Yes, I am the same one!" They asked, "Who healed you? What happened?" He told them, "The man they call Jesus made mud and spread it over my eyes and told me, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash yourself.' So I went and washed, and now I can see!" Where is he now?" They asked. "I don't know," he replied. Then they took the man who had been blind to the Pharisees, because it was on the Sabbath that Jesus had made the mud and healed him.

The Pharisees asked the man all about it. So he told them, "He put the mud over my eyes, and when I washed it away, I could see!"

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man Jesus is not from god, for he is working on the Sabbath." Others said, "But how could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?" So there was a deep division of opinion among them.

Then the Pharisees again questioned the man who had been blind and demanded, "What's your opinion about this man who healed you?" The man replied, "I think he must be a prophet." The Jewish leaders still refused to believe the man had been blind and could now see, so they called in his parents.

They asked them, "Is this your son? Was he born blind? If so, how can he now see?" His parents replied, "We know this is our son and that he was born blind, but we don't know how he can see or who healed him. Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who had announced that anyone saying Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from the synagogue. That's why they said, "He is old enough. Ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and told him, "God should get the glory for this, because we know this man Jesus is a sinner." "I don't know whether he is a sinner," The man replied. "But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!" "But what did he do?" they asked. "How did he heal you?" "Look!" the man exclaimed. "I told you once. Didn't you listen? Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

Then they cursed him and said, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses! We know God spoke to Moses, but we don't even know where this man comes from" "Why

that's very strange!" the man replied. "He healed my eyes, and yet you don't know where he comes from? We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn't have done it." "You were born a total sinner!" they answered. "Are you trying to teach us?" And they threw him out of the synagogue.

When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answered, "Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him" "You have seen him," Jesus said, "and he is speaking to you!" "Yes, Lord, I believe!" the man said, And he worshiped Jesus."

This is a man who has been labelled a lot of things by a lot of people and most of them aren't particularly good. The labelling begins in Verse 2 with the disciples who labelled him 'a sinner' or a 'son of a sinner'. They're not sure which one but they're pretty sure that we should label him one of the two. The labelling continues a little later on with the neighbours in Verse 8 who say "we know this man as the blind beggar". That's our label for him 'the beggar'. The blind man who begs down on the street corner. And they have labelled him so much so by that label that some of them can't even recognize who he is now that he's out of his context of sitting on the corner begging for change and they can't even identify him now that he's walking around with 20-20 vision. In verse 21 his parents come along and they have labelled him 'a liability'. Because they are worried that by being associated with him they are going to risk being cast out of the synagogue and so, to them, he is labelled 'a liability'. You see the Pharisees were on a mission and the man's parents concluded that they had to cut ties with him now or he'll take both of us down with him.

But probably the most litigious labellers were the Pharisees. Initially it's very clear to them that this man is a problem, so much so that he is causing division among them because of what Jesus has done for him. You see, the problem is if this man was truly blind from birth and has now been healed, that's a problem for them. First because it happened on the Sabbath day and no work is supposed to happen on the Sabbath day, according to them. Secondly, he was born blind and healing a man who was born blind was extremely rare. The blind man actually says we've never heard of this happening before. And so, if he was healed from being blind from birth, this was almost unheard of. Third, the people if they believed that Jesus could do this kind of thing, Jesus was going to become more popular than ever and that was a problem. For, if Jesus could actually do this kind of thing then he has some kind of awesome power and that was going to be a big threat to their power and that was a problem. You see, if they could somehow prove that this man was a phoney or a fraud then all was well, but if not, he was a big problem.

As the story progresses the Pharisees try to deal with the problem by slapping another label on to this man. They said "You were born a total sinner". there's no ambiguity here, there's no benefit of the doubt, the disciples asked if it was him or his parents who were the

sinners, but to the Pharisees there was no question. The NIV says it this way: “You were steeped in sin at birth.” The Pharisees labelled him a total sinner but they don’t stop there because they have one more label to apply before the story is done. They say “You were born a total sinner and are you trying to teach us.” Then they threw him out of the Synagogue. The final label they slapped on him was ‘an outcast’ a social outcast, a religious outcast. Now, that’s quite the collection of labels. Can you imagine what it would have been like to walk around with a set of labels like that stuck to your chest.

But there’s something more dramatic happening in this story. Something that’s going on behind the scenes, a transformation of sorts and it is best tracked watching the man’s relationship with Jesus develop over the course of the story. At first they ask him what had happened and who had healed him and the man says “I don’t know who he is, it’s some guy named Jesus, we are really just strangers the two of us, but I heard his disciples talking and they said his name was Jesus. So this man called Jesus, and that’s where this relationship begins. But as this story goes on it develops and later on the Pharisees are questioning him and he says “I think he must be a prophet.” And the relationship grows and he becomes an admirer of Jesus for his abilities and what he has been able to do. As the story goes on and on he talks to the Pharisees and eventually he confesses that he has become a disciple of Jesus. That they say he actually asked, kind of sarcastically I think to the Pharisees “Do you want to become his disciples too?” Which of course the answer was of course not. But that is where his relationship has developed to and progressed to and finally when Jesus comes back and finds him at the end, the man becomes a worshipper of Jesus. Jesus says “Do you know who the son of man is?” “Do you believe in the son of man?” and the man says “Who is he?” And Jesus says “The one you are speaking to” and the man begins to worship him. And you see the man’s relationship with Jesus progress and develop even though Jesus isn’t actually present for most of the story but nonetheless, it starts to grow and develop and we see over the course of this story a dramatic change in the way the man views Jesus. But let me suggest to you today, that it all starts with the way Jesus views the man.

The chapter begins with the disciples trying to decide how to correctly label the blind man. If his condition is a result of his parents’ sin, then we should feel sorry for this guy to have to deal with such a terrible fate for something that wasn’t his fault at all. Now if his condition is a result of his own sin, then we should treat him like a sinner who is being punished by God. So we need to know which of these labels should we apply to him, Jesus.

Listen to Jesus’ response to that question. In Verse 1: “They were walking along and they saw a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples asked him “Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents, since he was born blind?” “Neither this man or his parents sinned” said Jesus “but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.” Jesus tells his disciples you need to ignore the label and see what he sees in this man. What Jesus sees is not a blind man or a beggar or a sinner or a liability or a problem or an outcast, what Jesus sees is an opportunity for the work of God to be displayed in his life. In fact, in Jesus’ eyes every life is an opportunity for the work of God to be displayed. Really, John could have

ended the story right there in Verse 3, but he says this “watch through this story as the work of God is displayed in this man’s life.”

You see, God doesn’t see the labels that we put on each other. He doesn’t even see the labels that we put on ourselves. What he sees is what he can do in our lives. The big difference between the blind man here in Chapter 9 and the lame man back in Chapter 5, is that the lame man continued to look at the labels others had given him and the labels he had given himself. Which is why when Jesus finds him later, he warns him and says “You’ve got to change or you’ll end up in worse shape than you were before.” But when Jesus finds the former blind man here in Chapter 9 it is a totally different story. My guess is that you are surrounded by people that can see nothing but the labels that other people have put on them. Odds are there are people like that in your family; at your school; at your office; on your hockey team; maybe even in your mirror. Wherever you find them, they all share one thing in common. They need to be reminded of who they really are. That they are not what the labels that people have put on them say they are. They are not what they labels they have put on themselves who say they are, they are above all: beloved by God and their life is an opportunity for the work of God to be gloriously displayed, everywhere you go, every day, you are surrounded by people just like these ones: Video.....people holding up signs, labelling themselves....(Song - Tell me once again who I am to you).

We have God to remind us who we are to Him and this needs to be our daily prayer: “God let me see myself like you see me.”

But what if we took the message of that song as the message of peoples’ hearts crying out to us? What if we made it our mission to be a reminder to everyone of who they are to God? What if we made it our mission to be a reminder to everyone of how God sees them? What if we made it our mission to be a reminder to everyone that their life, whatever state it might currently be in, is an opportunity for God’s work to be gloriously displayed? What if as a Church family, we made it our mission to remind everyone in this City of who they are to God. Beloved. Let’s try that this week and see what happens.