

March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## John 4:5-42 “Labels and Scars”

This is based on a poetic story written by Nathan Nettleton and adapted to our time and place here at First Christian Church in Chico.

It's easy to believe what others say about you ... especially when you know it's true. But something inside of you rebels against these labels — orphan, redneck, queer, teacher's pet, nerd, alien, bible thumper, mentally ill, jock, refugee, homeless, liberal, dropout, illiterate, migrant, addict, yuppie, obese, perfectionist, Californian, loner, divorcee, peculiar, someone who lives in *that* neighborhood, Jew, sick, skinny, only child, conservative, cheerleader. Samaritan ... woman. It doesn't *feel* fair. It doesn't say *who you are* but what can you say? If the shoe fits. Sure the folks who label you might be *handling* the truth maliciously but ... it's still the truth isn't it?

At face value, what the label says is true so what's the use fighting it? Just bite your tongue, crawl back into your box, hide your tears and let a little bit more of you die. Because a little bit *seems* to die every time you're reduced to a label ... even if the label fits. Or fits only a part of you. Or maybe it's something that only *used* to fit you. But every time as you crawl back into your box embarrassed, humiliated, ashamed but fighting to keep it from showing, the box feels a little more like a prison.

But you get used to it after a while. You don't even feel like protesting anymore. You just get used to it. You just accept the label. Maybe you even forget what else you might be and you just cave in. Maybe you even begin to use the label on yourself. Maybe at first with a sort of comedic “self-mockery” but then with an air of weary resignation. Then it just becomes a name that everyone identifies you with. And it gets old. So you retreat into the box.

So one day you have to make a supply run. You sneak out of your box at a time of the day when folks aren't generally out and about because

you want to avoid the stares and snickers, or sometimes the flat-out hostility of unkind people. While you're out, you meet a stranger. Who is this person? What's he doing out here at this time of day? What does he know?

He asks for your help. He obviously doesn't know much about you because no one ever looks to *you* for help. They'd rather do without than ask you. But before you can stop yourself, you're telling this guy *why* you're not worth talking to and how he definitely shouldn't look to you for help. You label yourself because you've worn those labels for so long that you feel sort of naked without them. It's like you're embarrassed to have them *overlooked* because you feel like you'd be guilty of deceiving someone ... that you'd be responsible for any mess they'd get into for just talking to you.

But this guy doesn't recoil in horror. He smiles. He offers to do something for you in return: "Hey, how 'bout you give me a drink of your water and I'll give you some of mine ... only mine will not just quench your thirst but well up inside you like a spring of life."

Yeah right! You know that nothing gets through your calloused hide. Nothing can touch your shriveled-up spirit. "Internal spring of life." Don't make me laugh. It hurts.

But then he speaks again and his words hit you like a ton of bricks. With just a few words he holds up a mirror and shows you yourself. He knows you. And not only does he know your labels and your boxes, but he also knows where they came from. And ... he knows the *truth behind them*. He knows the secrets you had almost forgotten about. With just a few words he peels back your defenses ... the layers of self-protection you've built and he exposes you to ... well ... *light*.

You think, "Uh-oh." But he doesn't move in for the kill! He doesn't expose these vulnerable points and then go after you for them. He names the labels only to peel them away as though they don't even

matter to him. He sees through them ... beneath them and he calls you by a name you've never heard. But it's a name that's vaguely familiar. A name that seems to belong to someone you might have aspired to be once upon a time. Someone who was lost and presumed dead a long time ago. And as he speaks that name something stirs within you. Something awakens as though living water had been poured on a dry seed and it plumped up, sprouted, and reached straight up towards the light.

Labels, scars, defenses and fears ... hurts, habits, and hangups all of a sudden fall away and with a sudden rush of energy you find yourself engaging this stranger who knows more than enough to take you down and keep you down. But he doesn't. And then someone you barely recognize as yourself begins to come forward.

You speak words long held up inside of you concerning your hopes and aspirations ... concerning your fears and insecurities ... concerning the fears and insecurities of your people ... concerning your yearning for the truth and for the one who will reveal the truth and put things right the one who will peel back the layers of hostility and hurt and reveal the truth of all things to all people. And suddenly there is an awkward moment where you realize that the hope you have just described is what he has just done for you and you know you've just described this man to himself without realizing it and that he is surely the anointed one ... the gifted one ... the chosen one ... the one who comes to save us.

For hasn't what was long dead within you entombed forever in labelled boxes just been raised to new life? And aren't you just bursting to tell someone to let others see for themselves? Even those you wouldn't have dared talk to? But now you're pouring out your story and your newfound faith.

“Come and see for yourselves a man who knew me from the inside out. A man who showed me who I am. Who showed me who I was created to be. A man who opened my grave and lifted me from the box. The

man who unbound me from layer after layer of grave clothes each bearing the labels that cut me. A man who saw me for what I had never yet been and never dared to hope I could be. This man invited this unknown real me to come forth and live”

Come and see for yourselves. Come and be named for who you are, for who you have been, for who you are yet to become. Come and see what he will find in you ... what labels and scars he will peel back and call you to leave behind and live free from a call both exhilarating and terrifying. Come and see. Come and confess that this one is truly the savior of the world. Come and see that he might pour into your hearts the living water of being truly and deeply known forgiven and accepted and feed you with the mysterious food of doing God’s will and the wine of your destiny embraced. For this is the One who will raise the world to life and lead us dancing into the banquet room of heaven.

The moral of the story? “The only label that has value is the one you choose for yourself. When Jesus sees us for who we really are, we are enabled to see ourselves for who we really are, without boxes and labels, and so be saved to become who we were created to be.”