

Growing up we all learned that little phrase, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

I may have been able to repeat the phrase over and over; but somehow it never lessened the pain caused by the words. I don’t remember all the words that others used but I remember how they hurt.

In elementary school I remember always being the last one to be picked for games. I remember how humiliating it was to have people fighting over whether or not they had to have you on their team.

I was uncoordinated and worse yet, unwanted.

In high school I was a failure when it came to math. I actually failed algebra and had to retake the class the following year. It was embarrassing to retake the class with underclassmen.

I wore the label of a failure in more ways than one in high school.

I still remember sitting in an English class in what was either 11th or 12th grade. I became an illustration for my teacher’s comparison between a man and a boy when she pointed to a fellow student who was covered with facial hair and then drew the class’s attention to me because I probably had never shaved at that point. The whole class just laughed and I wanted to crawl in a hole and never come out. (I’ve since learned it is a blessing not needing to shave every day!

Over the years I came to think about myself with a label that fit in more ways than one- I was an accident. I was an unplanned pregnancy. I was a surprise to my parents! My mom has told me the story of crying at our neighbor’s kitchen table as she told her friend about this unexpected news. My parents had divested themselves of everything associated with a baby; after all, there was ten years between me and my brother. Not that my parents didn’t love me; but to a mother who was 42 and a dad who was 53 I wasn’t what they were expecting at that stage in their life!

I think we’ve all worn labels at one point in our life. We touched on it briefly at staff meeting this week discussing some of the labels we endured in the early years of our life. What was interesting was that you could almost feel the hurt still associated with those labels.

And I asked folks on FB this week to share some of the labels that were affixed to them. They were familiar labels; labels we’ve all heard, or worse yet, labels we’ve placed on others: fat, geek, nerd, dork, ugly, Brillo head, four eyes, stupid, hand-me-down, coward, bean-pole...

Living in those moments, I think most of us would agree that 'sticks and stones' would have been preferable to the 'words' that cut deeply and hammered at our heart.

I hope you brought your label from last week along this morning or got one on your way in. If you haven't already written something on it maybe you can take a moment now to think about that label you wear- the one that still haunts you and rears its ugly and painful head at all the wrong times.

Bearing the brunt of labels others place on us is something that even Jesus understood firsthand. Even before his birth the prophet Isaiah, speaking about Jesus as the Messiah said that he would be 'despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.' (53:3) There were those who tried to label Jesus about his 'illegitimate' birth. When he began his unconventional ministry, the religious leaders accused him of being 'a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners.' (Matthew 11:19) Even when he hung on the cross Jesus had labels hurled in his direction.

Why even one of the men Jesus called to be his disciple labeled Jesus.

Read John 1:43-46

Whatever labels others tried then, and still try today, to affix to Jesus; they just never stuck! Jesus repelled worldly labels because he knew that there was only one label that mattered. Jesus was God's own Son and the only label that mattered to Jesus was the word God spoke on the day of Jesus' baptism: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mt 3:17)

I never realized until this week the connection that those words have to the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. These were familiar words that would have been known to Jesus, and to the people who were gathered that day at his baptism. As the opening line of Isaiah 42 this phrase implied that everything which followed was included. So when Jesus heard, 'You are my son...' he also heard these words: 1-4a, 6-7.

What Jesus had in these words from his Father were words that included a blessing- a blessing that conferred upon Jesus honor, purpose, meaning, a special future and an active commitment to fulfill this blessing. (BTW, we are going to go in-depth on this concept of blessing during the month of May so stay tuned!)

So what does all this have to do with the labels that have hurt us? Well let me tell you what it reveals to me and how they've come to change my labels.

I think the most profound label that I've had to struggle with in my life was fatherless. It wasn't a label that others placed on me; but it was one that over time I came to see that I had placed on myself. Growing up from the age of three without my father always left me wondering what it would be like to have a father.

Thankfully there were a lot of men who did what they could to fill the gap; but none of them were my dad. When I failed at trying to play baseball; I chalked it up to not having a father to play catch with and teach me how to swing a bat. I can think of other ways in which that label left me with a lot of hurt.

I struggled for a long time with the label of fatherless. But in my later teen years I began to hear the words of Psalm 68:5. Psalm 68:5 simply says that God is the father of the fatherless.

Gradually, I began to understand that I wasn't fatherless. Fatherless was a lie that I had believed and used to label myself. But by the grace of God I began to understand who I really was. And that grace which made me a child of God slowly began to dissolve the adhesive on those old labels that had been affixed to me for so long.

I began to realize what I was missing in my life. I was missing the father who could bless me with the truth about who I am. For so long I was searching for the blessing of a father who could confer upon me honor, purpose, meaning, a special future and an active commitment to fulfill this blessing.

I started to learn in the process of reminding myself that God is father to the fatherless that the only label that really mattered in my life was that I was the child of God- God was my Father! And by his grace he began to slowly peel off the old labels and give me a new name.

I was no longer a failure. I was wanted. I wasn't an accident. And most of all I wasn't fatherless!

Don't let me give you the impression that my old labels fell off over night; there are still remnants hanging on!

But here is the key! When I let God's grace into my life I became a new creation- I got a fresh start; a label with a new name- child of God!

And when you and I experience the grace of God; when we accept that we are loved by God- forgiven- then we become a new creation.

By grace we are no longer who people said we were.

By grace the power of those labels over us begins to lessen.

By grace we get a second chance to become the person that God created us to become!

By grace we get a new label- child of God!

Next week, we're going to follow up with this idea of how labels lie and take it a step further as we stop labeling others and begin to extend grace to others.

But to close this morning I want to ask you to take a step to begin peeling off the old labels. Because of the cross we are a New Creation- we have a new name by the grace of God. Because of the grace of God demonstrated on the cross I want to invite you to begin the process of leaving behind your old label. In just a moment I want to invite you to come forward and put that old label on this cross. And when you walk away I want you to take a clean label.