

# Labels

*Amy Boyd-Kirksey, July 31, 2016*

It's summertime, but the living hasn't been exactly easy. The past two months have been tumultuous.

The presidential campaign, which has felt especially contentious this year in both major parties, has reached a fever pitch after back to back conventions which have produced plenty of political drama.

Inexplicable acts of violence, both at home and abroad, have dominated headlines and generated strong opinions as to what should be done to stop them. It is enough to make a person want to turn away from the newspaper, the TV, the radio, and the internet. I don't know about you, but I need to think about something other than the craziness that seems to be coming at us from all angles. I want to focus on something that is stable and non-controversial.

So let's talk about laundry.

Now, I don't love doing laundry. It is a never ending cycle of domestic drudgery. But I like to have clean clothes. I think it's safe to say no matter our outlook on the world, the appreciation for clean clothes is something we all have in common. And most of us have access to a couple of handy little machines that supposedly make the process of cleaning our clothes fairly simple.

But I have a tendency to make things more difficult than they need to be. So the process of doing the laundry in my house has a complex set of rules. Depending on the item of clothing, there are specific laundry machine speeds and water temperatures that must be used. I even have different kinds of laundry detergent. Dark items require a specific type of detergent so they won't fade after multiple washings. My sons, who are in different stages of learning how to do their own laundry, are required to learn this arcane set of rules. They are instructed that a polo shirt is never washed in the same load as a t-shirt, and don't you forget it.

Why all the complicated rules? My main motivation is to do all I can to make sure we get as much use as possible from the clothes we own. Both my parents grew up in the Depression Era and taught me and

my brothers the importance of taking care of the things you are lucky enough to have. Also, I wouldn't buy articles of clothing if I didn't like them. It is certainly worth the effort to make something you like last as long as possible.

But even I have my limits. The label you see on the front cover of your Order of Worship is from an item of clothing I recently purchased. Because I bought this shirt online, I did not see what its proper care requires until I opened the shipping box. Hand wash? Ok, I can do that. Dry flat? If I must. Roll in towel to remove excess moisture? OK, now I have a problem. I really like this shirt and want to keep it, but if it's going to last I'm going to have to put in some effort. I need to follow all the instructions on the label and it is not going to be easy.

Labels have been around for a long time. They can let a person know if he or she should avoid a certain food because the person is on a low-sodium diet. They let us know if we can afford to purchase an item or if we should look for a lower priced option. And they tell us the best way to take care of our clothes. But when you apply labels to people, things get more complicated. Our educational system uses labels to try and identify the best way to help a child fulfill his or her potential, but despite best intentions this labeling can sometimes lead to generalizations that ignore the specific needs of each individual. There are many different personality tests which try to help us understand everything from our leadership styles to the best way to refresh our personal energy, but more often than not I've seen people scratching their heads at the results. For example, I am an INTJ on the Myers Briggs scale. For those who don't know, the Myers Briggs personality scale breaks the entirety of humankind into 16 different personality types which are described by four letters. As an INTJ, I am described as primarily possessing the following traits: Introversion, Intuition, Thinking, and Judgment. When I read the description of my personality, I do identify with some of the characteristics, but others feel absolutely foreign to me. The uniqueness of each of us is impossible to categorize.

But labeling people is hard to resist. Right now, the labels which may be on the minds of many of us are those of a political nature. Yes, there are those who are committed red Republicans and die-hard blue Democrats, but the colors of our personal stripes are more complicated than a two crayon box. There are many shades of purple in between the purest of the two political tones. Is a Republican For Trump or Never Trump? Is a Democrat Standing with Hillary or still Feeling the Bern? Or, maybe someone is None Of The Above or How Do I Move To Canada? And there are other colors in the complex palette of our beliefs. Black Lives Matter. Blue Lives Matter. The Green Party. The different combinations of beliefs that each of us holds are much more varied than the largest box of crayons out there.

Back when my kids were little and we were living in Wilmington, Delaware, my older son Sam had therapist who came to our house on a weekly basis to work with him. She was very laid back, was into organic food and other aspects of holistic living, and often expressed the preference for diplomatic versus military solutions to international conflict. I had her pegged as someone who would likely vote for Democrats. So during the Fall of 2000, it took me completely by surprise when she pulled into our driveway with a brand new bumper sticker supporting the Republican presidential candidate. We had a good relationship so I felt comfortable enough to share my surprise with her. She responded that the reason she was supporting the candidate was over the issue of guns. She and her husband owned guns and shot for sport at a local gun club. Their belief in this particular issue was strong enough to inform their choice in the voting booth. I often think about this when I fall into the trap of thinking I have a person figured out.

But it is so easy to fall into that trap. We cling to labels because labels give the illusion of certainty in an uncertain time. It is frankly comforting to align ourselves with others who we think wear the same labels. This is not difficult to do in our connected world. We can choose which cable news network we watch so we hear opinions with which we agree. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter give us ways to weed out the voices we don't want to hear. Facebook and Twitter also tell us where the family

and friends with whom we are connected on these social media platforms stand on a multitude of issues, whether they share articles or express a point of view in their own words.

In the last couple of years, Facebook has started to show what posts our family and friends “liked.” To “like” a post on Facebook means a person clicks on a small “thumbs up” icon under the post. In essence, it is the same thing as the person telling you “I agree with what this has to say.” I bring this up because this new feature gives insight into a person who uses Facebook to share pictures of family or vacations or funny animals and not political opinions. That person may think he or she is being apolitical in this new public sphere, but they’re not.

So what happens when these insights made possible by social media completely alter the labels we may have applied to a person, and not in a good way? It is hard to see someone who you work well with, or who has helped you, or you have fun with endorsing opinions which to you are ill-informed at best.

What does one do with these conflicting impressions of another? What does one do when the label of “Cool Person” does not mix with the label of “Holds A Political Opinion With Which I Completely Disagree.” Do you confront the person? Do you start to avoid him or her? Do you continue to engage, but with a coldness that was not previously present in the relationship?

Yes, labeling other people can be problematic. But there is a label we all have that should receive attention. It is the care label that has been given by God. The instructions are simple on the surface: to love one other, to be kind, to strive for peace with all our heart. It’s the carrying out of these instructions that is not so simple. To treat a person with whom we disagree ideologically with the kindness and respect God requires can be tough, especially given the passionate feelings many of us hold on political matters. It requires more than a machine wash warm, tumble dry low effort. It requires us to metaphorically hand wash, roll in a towel, reshape, and dry flat. Sometime we even need to use the cool iron. In order for us to share the love of Christ with the world, we have to share it with everyone. We have to share it with the Republican and the Democrat. With the staunch conservative

and the far-left liberal. With those who say what we are thinking and with those to whom we want to say “what are you thinking”?!

There are about 100 days until the election, and it will feel even longer if we allow the vitriol of the political stage to permeate our lives. Come November 8, no matter the result, some of us will be happy and some of us will be unhappy. But after the hype subsides, we have to continue working with each other, helping each other, and having fun together. It will be a miserable existence if we retreat to our respective corners either to gloat or to lick our wounds. So let’s try to look past the labels that supposedly define us and follow God’s care label . Our relationships with each other are worth the effort required make them last.

Amen.