

Labels

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During my annual visit to the doctor's office not long ago, I was asked if I had any interest in getting connected with their new online patient portal. Sure, I told them.

When I finally went to check it out, I noticed that under my name and a few other pieces of personal information, there was a box that somehow seemed to summarize the practice's view of me and my current status: overweight.

Sure, I could lose a few pounds. I could consume fewer cookies or lower my intake of wine (especially in the summer). But, it's not like I don't exercise or take care of myself—I do. I exercise vigorously three-four times each week. I eat my veggies and I limit my consumption of red meat, etc. I don't smoke (cigarettes or other substances) nor do I eat a pint of ice cream every day.

Yet, as far as the medical practice is concerned, there's just one word that sums me up: overweight.

What puzzled me even more was that my visit with the nurse practitioner didn't even mention weight. We talked mostly about my inability to get a good, full night's sleep, my symptoms, and some possible plans of action. We also talked about some of the normal issues around aging—creaky joints and so forth.

I get the sense that, somehow, with all of the things that the nurse and nurse practitioner typed into the medical chart program that the practices uses, the program, in all of its computerly wisdom, decided that the best word to sum up my medical status was *overweight*.

We live in a world of labels. It's as if our embracing of technology has stripped us of the wealth of descriptors that are actually available in the English language. Nuance seems gone as well.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why, even though it's not very popular in this part of the world, I stick with church. I have a renewed appreciation for the church's

ability to resist the temptation to do things like reduce people to simple (and not helpful), one-word labels. At Old South, the congregation I serve, I can be myself without worrying that everyone is trying to sum me up in one word.

It's not that there aren't words that are used to describe me, or that I don't use certain describing words (a popular phrase in our house, since the kids went to Montessori school) to talk about others. But I can't think of any time in my career as a pastor when we've actively engaged in efforts to reduce people to one or two words.

Because people are just more complicated than that.

At Old South, I can think of several people who might easily be described in one or two words, mostly because of difficulties they have faced in life. But I've noticed that, without ever needing to remind people, we simply don't do that. Instead, there's a lot reaching out, a lot of accepting, a lot of not worrying too much about personal foibles. People are accepted for who they are—the good and the not-so-good.

It is through the acceptance of the whole of the person, with a whole assortment of describing words, that each of us trusts that we ourselves will be accepted in that way as well. And, more than that, through such acceptance we all become—each of us and all of us together—more and more like the people of God.

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