

No One Is Just One Thing

We like to put people in pigeonholes. It makes it easier for us to know what to say to or think about someone. When we meet a person for the first time, we nearly always begin by casting around for some category under which to file them, some familiar label that will identify them for us.

Sometimes the pigeonhole will be ethnic. If the new person has an Asian face, we might ask "Where are you from?" If the person replies, "I was born in Denver," we'll keep asking until she gives in and says, "My grandparents came from Japan." At that point we'll rummage our memories for all we know about Japan so as to make conversation. We'll say: "Oh, I love sushi!" Or whatever.

But by far our favorite pigeonhole is occupation. The first question we'll ask that new person will probably be, "So what do you do?" Then, based on the answer, we'll jump to all sorts of conclusions about that person's personality and circumstances. Doctors are caring and nearly omniscient. Accountants are mild-mannered and hard-working and perhaps a little dull. Pastors are priggish and critical and perhaps a lot dull. ("Oh," people often say to me, "a pastor! I'd better watch my language around you!")

To make things worse, some of us embrace the stereotypes about our own professions, doing all we can to live up to our own categories. Thus artists often dress as they think artists are supposed to dress (i.e. loudly and badly), and business executives sometimes use words like "synergize" in normal conversations, just as if those words actually meant something (which is so cute). Clergy are among the worst at this: among my fellow pastors are many who have so wholly conformed themselves into their idea of what a pastor should be that it's nearly impossible to know who they are. At pastor's meetings, I avoid these people at all costs. They are boring beyond words.

So is everyone who tries to fit into a predesigned mold, whether that mold is "Pastor" or "Engineer" or "Mother" or "Christian." The truth is that no one is just one thing. We are all a merry and fascinating mix of different and often conflicting traits – whether we're a doctor who skis the Birkebeiner, an engineer who plays clarinet, a lawyer who is applying to become an aid worker in Africa, or a pastor writes fantasy novels. We are all more interesting than the first thing people learn about us.

In April, we will be focusing on becoming a whole person. In our Sunday sermon series ("On Balance") we will focus on keeping all the varied aspects of our lives in perspective to make up a single whole: our work, our passions, our families, our faith, and our relationships. Then, in our Wednesday class, we will look at finding balance and wholeness in the church by identifying the different particular strengths that each of us has to contribute to the Body of Christ. When we really are all that we are, we are fascinating, and we join our unique gifts, the church can become even better.