

“What’s On Your Bumper?”
July 5, 2009

MESSAGE Pt. 1:

That’s right...symbols, signs, bumper stickers...they all can carry a very strong, and sometimes-unintended message. For instance, the swastika symbol like we just saw in the Da Vinci Code video. When I was in India back in 2005 I remember looking for a cab at the airport and being completely shocked to see a swastika on several of the taxis ([india_swastika](#)) I went out of my way to find a cab that didn’t have one. Here’s the thing though we have been so conditioned to understand the swastika ([nazi_flag_2](#)) only as it was twisted by the Nazis during World War II...the problem is thought that in India...the swastika means good living, or good luck. So, by going out of my way to find a cab without a swastika...I’d really put myself in harms way, because in India, to be in a car....on the road, you want all the luck you can get. NASCAR and Indycar should send their drivers to India for training...if they make it out alive, they get a ride for next season.

Now obviously the swastika is an extreme example. But when it comes to expressing ourselves a little more subtlety...what about the bumper sticker? Over the last month, I have become quite the student of bumper stickers. I’ve been diligently snapping photos of people’s bumpers. I never thought shooting photos of peoples bumpers would turn into such an academic study. One day as I was on the hunt...a thought came to me—I wondered if there was any association with personality type and the kind of person who put a bumper sticker on their bumper. I wondered, are people who have bumper stickers more likely to be outspoken...moreover, I wondered...are bumper stickers really a true reflection of the person driving the car. Then I thought...this isn’t the kind of thing you leave to guesswork, so I consulted a professional....

MESSAGE Pt. 2:

Armed with that expert information, I felt much better equipped to continue with my in-depth study of bumper stickers. So, before we move on, I want to share with you some of the bumper stickers I have found.

Some stickers I searched for, much like the Holy Grail...like this one ([human_rights](#)). Who knows what this one is? I see it all over the place—of course until you look for it—kind of like actually deciding on a the pair of shoes you want, and not being able to find them. So yeah, this one is the symbol for human rights.

Now as I share these bumper stickers with you...I want you to be thinking about some things. DO you think

these symbols...these bumper stickers say something about the driver of the car. What do you imagine the driver of the car being like based on the bumper sticker you see? I am giving you permission to be judgmental and catty.

- Here is another classic ([myboss](#)), old school bumper sticker. The quintessential *My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter*. Now don’t forget to judge and be catty...do you have your mental snapshot of the person?
- Now this one is a two-parter...([mychildshines](#)). There are lots of variations of this one. You know...My child is an honor student at such and such. Hmm...it occurs to me my parents never had that bumper sticker? Anyway, I suspect these are just proud parents. But what about this one ([labrador](#))? Why do you figure someone would put this one on their car? I found this one in the parking lot at COSTCO and I was with my daughter Annie...who just happens to be an honor student! She took great exception to it...Okay so this is all in good fun...I think, but the more bumpers I shot, the more I really wondered about a connection.
- Sit with this one for a second ([animals](#)) Do you have that person pegged?
- Okay, this one was just plain funny ([whosyourdaddy](#)). It’s funny, but I bet you have an image don’t you.
- Now officially, I’m not allowed to think this one is funny ([fishnchips](#)). Whether you think it is funny or not...again, what image are you getting for the person driving this car?
- If you weren’t sure about the person with the previous bumper sticker...let me clear it up for you...this ([earth](#)) one was on the same bumper. There was another one too, but I’m saving it for next week.
- This ([coexist](#)) was another one I looked and looked for...I wonder how they would get along with the person who drives that last car ?
- Finally...I did hit the jackpot. I thought these things only existed in the photo-shopped world of internet images...but then, whabam! I got one. ([covered](#)) How about that?! The Holy Grail of bumper sticker hunting.

Believe me, I could go on and on...in fact, if you’d like to see the entire collection, check out the Media link from our website thegardenonline.org for a little video montage.

Anyway...the fact is I may be reading way too far into these bumper stickers. But I just can’t help thinking that

bumper stickers do say a little bit about who we are...it's kind of like they are a snapshot that give people a brief introduction to who we are...

Message Pt. 3:

How many of us can identify with the young woman in the interview? A seemingly simple question, who are you? Many of us spend a lifetime trying to answer that question. Many of us do things intentionally and unintentionally in an attempt to tell people who we are...or aren't, and...more importantly who we want to be.

Last Saturday at Annual Conference in Muncie...and for those of you who may not know...Annual Conference is the annual gathering of all Methodist Churches in the state of Indiana. It is kind of our annual business meeting. Well, anyway, on Saturday, a conference-wide community work project had been organized. Everyone that was participating was to wear a red t-shirt that said "Rethink Church". So, I show up to our worksite and there is this sea of red t-shirts....a sea of red, all except one bright yellow t-shirt. I'll give you one guess who was wearing the yellow t-shirt.

If you guessed me, you'd be right. As many of you are aware, being identified as "church" can come with some baggage. People make lots of assumptions when they know you are part of a church. Well, if I'm honest, wearing the yellow shirt did serve to satisfy my naturally rebellious side; however, internally there was something else going on...often times we get consumed by an identity. What I mean is...the identity that people associate with us by the way we dress, the house we live, and dare I say...by our bumper stickers...I believe all of those things are just a superficial part of who we are. So for me, the yellow t-shirt was a subtle way of saying...this, all of this...is only a part of who I am.

(Is there anyone who ever remembers changing their mind from the paint on a sign? what puts a hundred thousand children in the sand? belief can, belief can what puts a folded flag inside his mother's hand? belief can, belief can)

MESSAGE Pt. 4:

So, what we put on our t-shirts, or bumpers...often times they are our beliefs, and sometimes they are very heartfelt, strong convictions. But I want to change directions on you just a little...You see I contend that what is on our bumpers, or any other external indicator of who are...those things don't define us, they are, in fact, only part of who we are...BUT...and here is the sticking point, often times WE let a t-shirt or a bumper sticker tell us all we need to know about someone. Which is what our Bible passage this morning alludes to...**Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong...**

So...let me tell you where all of this bumper sticker madness came really came from. It comes from kind of getting things all wrong...Several weeks ago we hosted a pancake eating contest where we raised money for St. Vincent de Paul Food Bank. We did the event down on 54th Street at Locally Grown Gardens and we had to haul everything, and I mean everything, to do a pancake-eating contest down to the site. Did I mention VW? No can do on hauling.

So, I called a good friend of mine in the neighborhood who I know has a truck...not only is Mike a guy who has a truck, he's just one of those guys you know you can count on. Anyway, we go up to Oak Hill and load up all the equipment and supplies and filled up the back of his truck...and then some.

When we get to my house and we unload the grill because I have to test it out to make sure it's going to work, and all the other supplies...I bade him farewell, thanks for helping and here are the keys to my car, let's just switch vehicles and all will be good..."Stan, did you think about how you are going to get that grill back into the truck, and how you're going to get it back off the truck at the site?" Uhhhhh.... "Stan, what time do you need me here in the morning?" Well he showed back up at 7:29 Saturday morning, helped me reload everything backing the truck, and followed me to the site of the contest, and of course, he helped me unload.

Here is where this whole bumper sticker mess really began. Now was the moment of truth...we really did have to switch vehicles. He was driving this huge Dodge Ram pick-up, I was driving Jenny's mid-size SUV. No problem so far, right? Wrong.

Take a closer look at the bumpers ([mccain_obama](#)). At this point I'm guessing you are making assumptions about which bumper belongs to whom. So, my friend begins to walk home...like he's not going to drive the car. We just kind of chuckled a bit, and he got in Jenny's car and drove off.

BUT...here is where things really get interesting. My friend Jennifer who helped put on the pancake-eating contest...she actually ate 18 pancakes...She thought the big blue truck was mine. She hadn't been there for the drop off and switch-a-roo. I didn't learn until a few weeks later when she and I were recording an Endless Deep podcast that she really thought it was my truck...let me show you what she said about it...this from our podcast...

MESSAGE Pt. 5:

So, that is where this quest to understand bumper stickers came from. It came from this little misunderstanding that fascinated me. But...I need to own up to where this really comes from...it comes from

my own perceptions, judgments...and beliefs. I had kind of forgotten all about the switch-a-roo until it was time to pack up and leave. The moment of truth came when I.../ had to get into my buddy's truck with THE bumper sticker ([mcain_obama](#)). I'm going to come right on out and admit...I was completely self-conscious and uncomfortable....because the truth is—I know how I can form opinions and judgments about people based on what I see on their bumpers—I do this as if what is on the bumper is a signed, sealed and delivered indictment about what kind of person is driving the car.

So, I'm driving around town...I have to stop and get gas. I was going up to people and saying...umm, this isn't my truck, this is my friends truck. This really isn't me. Later that night if occurred to me very strongly, very clearly...
"Belief...or perceived beliefs can divide us...even people we think we know."

How often do we let our assumptions, or what we believe we know about someone prevent us from really getting to know them. You see, bumper stickers, or whatever it is...a yellow t-shirt...they represent only a small fraction of who we really are. Mike and I have been good friends for several years now...we are both well aware of our perceived differences...our bumper sticker differences...but our real friendship is based on some shared values that transcend the superficial. Values that allowed us to work together for a common cause...to help hungry people.

The motto of our mother-church...the United Methodist Church is Open hearts, Open Doors, Open Minds...on this 4th of July weekend where we celebrate independence and freedom; my prayer is that each of us opens our minds to the beautiful possibilities in others we might not see if we only look skin-deep...or uh, bumper deep. AMEN

CLOSE:

One of the guest speakers at our Annual Conference last week was Rev. Adam Hamilton who is the pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the country. He had recently preached a sermon series in the midst of the election...where our perceived differences are made painfully obvious. He said someone approached him after the service and said..."Pastor, are you liberal or conservative?" His response was..."Absolutely." By conservative if you mean I have golden-truths that I hold dear, then yes. By liberal if you mean do I have an open mind to the possibility of doing things differently, then yes.

On this Independence Day may each of us truly celebrate the differences and diversity that all of our wars have been fought to steadfastly preserve.