

Have Salt in Yourself

Last Sunday as I sat in the back of the sanctuary next to Anne and Emily, I listened to Jill read the text for her sermon. And as she did my mind cried out “That’s a cliffhanger; you can’t do that! You can’t end in the middle of story!” Well, of course you can. She did. We do it all time when reading Scripture. I mean, *really* when’s the last time you sat down and read the *whole* bible in one sitting. (LOL) I, of course, chuckled to myself when I realized these thoughts were flying through my mind, as I doubted any of you would realize that the immediate story continued for a couple more paragraphs ; a couple more paragraphs that I was assigned to preach on the following Sunday. Honestly, I confess, I doubt I would have realized that the story continued if I hadn’t already begun preparing for this week’s sermon.

Since the text for this week relies much on last week’s scripture reading, I will *very* briefly paraphrase last week’s text.

Mind you now, parts of this paraphrase are excerpted from the Rev. Jill Oglesby-Evans’s paraphrase rather than our usual NRSV:

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. AGAIN, the disciples are clueless. And, as if to drive home the measure to which the disciples are clueless, Mark then has Jesus asking them, “So, what were you guys arguing about on the way here?” He knows, of course. He’d overheard.

“Well, *I’m* the greatest among the disciples,” boasts Peter, “because Jesus called me *first*. Hellooo. - the rock on which he built the church?”

“Well,” says Matthew, the tax collector, “I figure *I* rule because he called me the *furthest!*” chuckling at his own joke.

“You guys,” grouse James and John, sons of thunder. “You always think *you’re* the only ones in the running.”

“When everybody knows *I’m* his favorite!” chirps John.

“The whole lot of you is full of balloons,” snaps Judas. “*I’m* the only one who really knows what’s going on here.” And he’s got a point.

“So, what were you guys arguing about on the way here?”

They'd been arguing about which one of them was the greatest, but embarrassed, they remain silent

"Okay guys, come here. Gather round," says Jesus. "Let me say it again:"

[Moving to the more concise Deedra Paraphrase]

"There is no one of you greater than another. Every human being, regardless of size, influence, importance, etc is a beloved child of mine. Whoever welcomes one such being in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one sent me."

Ahhh... Such a beautiful resolution, the idea of all human beings, being beloved children of God accepted and welcomed by all in the Body of Christ.

Beautiful. Only (LOL), that's not really the end. The disciples are either not "getting it," or rather, at this point, they don't want to believe that Jesus really means what is saying. Remember how the story began? They were arguing among themselves regarding who is the greatest, who is the best. Surely, it must be one of "them."

Hear now today's Scripture Reading from the NRSV, Mark 9:38-50.

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us."

But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.

And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

So although we learned last week that among the beloved Body of Christ there is not one person greater than another, no exceptions, this concept still hadn't made its way through the disciples' dense heads. (Really I wonder if the concept has fully made its way through my head and into my actions. What about you?)

Anyway, possibly hoping that Jesus is indeed confused, or doesn't quite mean what he says about whoever wants to be first, must really be last and servant of all, the disciples graciously give Jesus an opportunity to make an exception. Certainly Jesus didn't mean everyone!

"Teacher," John remarks, "Today we came across someone, not one of us, who was casting out demons in your name. So we tried to stop him."

Now here we, the reader, snicker out loud behind John's back, "Yeah, *tried* is the key word. You couldn't even cast out the demon from the little boy last week. Jesus had to do it himself. If you weren't so obsessed with who is the greatest, then you might have learned something from this "other" person instead of trying to run him off."

But Jesus, didn't laugh at or poke fun of them; he continued his teaching.

"Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

Reward. Jesus hits them right where it hurts the most. "Surely," the disciples think, "the greatest disciple will receive the greatest reward." But this is not what Jesus is saying. According to Jesus, everyone receives the "reward." In light of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are able to recognize the reward being that even in our human sinfulness we are reconciled with God. (Hallelujah!)

But the disciples, who haven't yet lived through Jesus' death and resurrection, see only the earthly reward, the great power, status, and influence that being a follower of Jesus gives them. After all they do have the ability to cast out demons and do miracles in Jesus' name. That will give anyone instant popularity, status, and fortune.

But Jesus reminds them, that the “reward” is not given to the greatest, best, or even first place person. Rather it is shared by all who are for Jesus.

And do you remember the “child” Jesus embraced; the one representing a weaker, non-important, non-influential being? Jesus goes a step further saying, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

Jesus continues, shifting the focus from the “other” to oneself.

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.

And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. “

Wow. That is a strong and powerful text! And it serves its purpose very well, to grab our attention firmly. We are tempted to ignore it altogether because of its vivid harshness and crudeness, and, quite frankly, because when read literally it condemns every single one of us to hell. However, when read in context we realize that it does exactly what Jesus intended for it to do. To grab and hold our attention! To take what he is saying seriously.

New Testament Scholar Craig Evans emphasizes just what it is that we are to take seriously, “Jesus teaches his disciples that they must be willing to be last, to be a servant, to show compassion to the weak and seemingly unimportant. To [welcome and] receive one such being is to receive Jesus himself, to receive even God who sent him. The disciples are not only to be compassionate toward the weaker of Jesus’ followers, but they are to be tolerant and supportive of those outside their circle who in their own way do the work of God. Indeed, even the smallest act of compassion for the cause will be rewarded.” (World Bible Commentary, Vol. 34b, p 75).

Following Jesus is not easy. “His teaching smacks of a grim realism,” Evans says, “that his disciples must take to heart. .. earlier it had been likened to taking up a cross and forfeiting one’s life (8:34-35). Now Jesus warns his disciples of their responsibilities. Arrogance, self-absorption, insensitivity and tyranny are all negative attitudes that frequently lie behind the

desire to be first and to be the greatest. Just as frequently these attitudes cause people to stumble, especially the younger, weaker, and less influential. Far from seeking positions of power, Jesus' disciples should seek opportunities for service. Rather than causing the little ones to stumble, the disciples must help them stand and grow in faith. The matter is so important to Jesus that he describes the dire consequences in shocking hyperbole; better to drown oneself in the sea than to offend a little one; better to cut off a hand or foot, or even pluck out an eye, than to risk throwing oneself into hell over some temptation or self-induced cause of stumbling." (World Bible Commentary, Vol. 34b, p 74).

But how are we to do this?

How do we consistently serve others without thinking of ourselves? How do we welcome and receive others who are "different" than us – or others that are not in our circle- but yet according to Jesus, still clearly apart of the Body of Christ? How do we surrender our self-desire and ambition for positions of power and influence so that we may serve, support, and help others grow in their faith?

Jesus gives us that answer.

And of course it is in his typical clear manner of teaching that Jesus encourages everyone to "Have salt in yourself."

"Have salt in yourself." Well what does that mean?

Jesus says, "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

The fire that we are salted with is not hellfire. Rather, it's the fire John the Baptist speaks of when he says, "He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt 3:11, Luke 3:16.). Just as Old Testament sacrifices were salted for purification to meet the standards of God's covenant, we too are salted, purified, and refined by the fire, the Holy Spirit, the overwhelming love and grace of Jesus.

We are salted by fire; we are purified and refined. We are made holy (Ex. 30:35; Ro 12:1-2). And as Jesus remind us, "Salt is good!" (Amen)

However, "if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?"

We know that salt doesn't lose its saltiness. We don't become more or less Christian, more or less forgiven and purified. But we can add so much other seasoning that the salt is no

longer recognized. What I mean by this is even as a redeemed and forgiven people, we can season ourselves with so many flavors besides God .

Sometimes the flavors are good and helpful and God given, but we like them and use them too much or in the wrong ways. I love cinnamon. My favorite gum is the long lasting, refreshing, cinnamon-flavored Big Red. I don't like hot tea, but I discovered that I'll drink a hot tea that's almost purely cinnamon in taste. I burn cinnamon candles in my home, and worst of all (poor Matt) every new recipe or, better yet, food concoction that I create, I want to add cinnamon. I'll spare you the nasty details, but cinnamon really shouldn't be added to just anything.

In a way related to my abuse of cinnamon, but slightly more serious, the disciples were tempted to misuse their gifts. They had the gift of being able to cast out demons and perform healing miracles. However, it is quite possible that they were tempted to use it for their own benefit and influence over others, to help them become "greater" rather than as service.

Sometimes in our life we add too much other seasoning to the salt that God has purified and redeemed us with. Simultaneously, we have many diverse roles – parent, child, sibling, employee, maybe employer, spouse, caregiver, chef, driver, friend; the list can go on and on. These all combine well with salt to make a wonderful, unique, and beloved child of God who is pure, refined, and holy. But sometimes the other seasonings get too strong, too powerful. Maybe we like the seasoning of work way too much and we become so focused on climbing the societal and corporate ladder that we let the idea of "success" and "well-being" triumph relationships with others and with God. Maybe we like the seasoning of preoccupations too much. What is that you ask? Anything that limits and distracts from your relationship with God and others - work, hobbies, addictive behaviors. It's different for each person. When our lives are dominated by other seasonings, we don't allow the salt to transform and change our lives.

So much so that others (and maybe even we ourselves) cannot recognize our saltiness.

Don't get distracted by the things of this world. Remember that Jesus has called us to be his disciples, to serve others, to not only recognize God's presence in "others," [others outside of our own circle, others who are weaker, less powerful, less influential than ourselves] to not only recognize them, but to be tolerant and supportive of them as well; remembering and living the great commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

When we are able to recognize and respond to God's presence in others, we will be at peace with one another. We will no longer need to argue over who is the greatest, no longer causing ourselves or others to stumble because of greed or selfish ambition.

Jesus says it quite clearly,

"Have salt in yourself and be at peace with one another."

That is my prayer for each of us, that we may have salt in ourselves, realizing that we are pure, refined, beloved, holy children of God. We've already been given the reward. Let's not season ourselves with worldly attempts of gaining false rewards. Rather, let's us humbly serve and love one another as we would serve and love Jesus.

To God be the glory. Amen.