

September 28, 2003  
Season after Pentecost  
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## Keeping Our Salt

Mark 9:38-50      *“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?”*

Our reading this morning from Mark’s gospel is a challenging one. It’s a small collection of Jesus’ teachings. At first, they don’t seem to be connected in any way. But the more we reflect on them, the more it seems Jesus is saying something to the disciples, to the church of Mark’s day, and to us, about being a community that truly reflects his spirit.

### Not One of Us

John, one of the disciples, complains to Jesus about an unauthorized exorcist on the loose! This guy is going around using Jesus’ name to cast out demons. But he is not part of the inner group of disciples.

John wants Jesus to put a stop to it. Here is a link with last week’s reading. There the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest and most important. They were still caught in ego, prestige, and status. They wanted their association with Jesus to give them power and status. But Jesus reminds them that the principle of Christian community is not “first and greatest,” but “last and least.” Humility and community. Not individualism and self-promotion.

Here it’s the same thing. The nameless exorcist isn’t “one of them.” The disciples are jealous of their position so close to Jesus. How can someone else who isn’t even traveling around with Jesus claim to have his authority? Jesus’ answer is, “Don’t stop the guy. No one who does a powerful deed in my name will be able to speak against me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus widens the circle. He’s not concerned with controlling everything and everyone. He doesn’t need to micromanage the work of God’s kingdom. And he’s not trying to make his little group of followers into an exclusive club.

Churches are not to be little kingdoms unto themselves. The church itself is not the kingdom of God, but seeks by its life to serve that kingdom. The Church of the Covenant has a special structure and vision. Membership is given specific definition with specific responsibilities. The focus is on intentional personal growth and mission. It is the way envisioned for this church from its beginnings, to help people take seriously the life of discipleship in community with others and in the service of the world.

We have a worthy and important vision and structure, which we need to cherish and continue to deepen in our understanding and our practice. I recall Bev Cosby saying on more than one occasion that the Church of the Covenant isn’t the only way to be the church and maybe it’s not the best way. It’s the way we have chosen but it’s not for everyone. He was in touch with Jesus’ spirit here. If we lapse into pride about who we are or think we are, we are off the mark. We stop living our faith and faithfulness, and start thinking that we are being faithful. The story of the unauthorized exorcist keeps us from pride and helps us remain focused on our own lives, commitments, and faithfulness. Jesus isn’t concerned with “protecting his territory,” but with calling persons into lives that take seriously love of God and neighbor.

Jesus expanded the circle even further. Earlier in Mark, someone comes in to where Jesus is teaching and tells him that his family is outside looking for him. Jesus looks around the room and says, “Who is my family? Here’s my family. Anyone who does the will of God is my family.” (Mk. 3:35) In Matthew 7, Jesus says this: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

Jesus is concerned about the use of his name by those who call him “Lord” but do not do what he asks. Those who are not even Christians can do the will of God. This takes away from us every motivation of pride and arrogance. Here is a strong indication that we as Christians need to be in dialogue with and attentive to the faithfulness not only of other Christians but also of non-Christians. We aren’t the only show in town!

Our life as a community needs to have a spirit of great humility, recognizing that God’s will is done by a variety of people in the world. We need to get free from measuring ourselves against others and remain focused on our own faith and faithfulness, doing what God has uniquely called us to do and be.

### Hospitality

Next Jesus says that those who give his followers a drink of water because they bear his name will be rewarded. This is reverse hospitality. Not our hospitality toward others, but theirs toward us. It is as important for us to receive hospitality from others as it is for them to receive ours. It is as blessed to receive as to give.

This is important. Being able to receive the kindness and caring of others creates a community of hospitality. If we only want to be givers, we are still trying to be in control and relate to others as though they have nothing to offer. How might things have been different if Christian missionaries had been as receptive to the gifts of the peoples and cultures they encountered, as they were eager to convert, educate, or change them? How might our nation be different with regard to our current destruction of the environment had we received the cup of water from Native American peoples and their deep spiritual regard for and harmony with the creation? In fact, the naïve, trusting, and genuine hospitality shown by native peoples to early European explorers, beginning with Columbus and his troops, was returned with enslavement and genocide. How might we as Westerners have learned to be less compulsive, domination-minded, and individualistic in our views if our missionaries—Protestant and Catholic—in Asian countries had allowed the far older spiritualities of those cultures to teach us something about mindfulness, true inner peace, and our interrelatedness to all of life?

Others have something to share with us, a cup of water for us. Can we receive it? Can we in this way be a blessing to others and create true community?

### Getting in the Way

Now Jesus says something really strange and troubling.

He tells the disciples that if they cause “one of these little ones who believe in me” to stumble, it would be better if they were drowned in the sea. Who are “these little ones?” Maybe Jesus was referring to the child he had just pointed to as an example for the disciples to learn humility. If we are humble enough to welcome a little child instead of seeking status, then we welcome Jesus and God. Maybe Jesus is talking about being careful how we think, act, and speak in the presence of children so that we don’t mess up their spirits. I think it is important these days that everything we do, think about, and plan be done in the presence of a child or children, or as though children were present. This gives real focus to what is important and true and good. Do we live our faith so that a child can perceive its authenticity and can understand? Not filling their heads with doctrine. Not loading them down with our moralizing, which may or may not be in accord with Christ. But being persons in whom children can sense the love and presence of God.

Maybe Jesus was talking about those who are new followers, new disciples. And for Mark, this would mean those who were new to the church. Do we make it hard for people to come to God, to Christ? The Church of the Covenant offers something clear, exciting, and

challenging for those who want to take seriously the life of faith. The structure of membership, with its spiritual disciplines, is an important clarification of what it means to follow Christ. But do we make it hard in other ways for people to come to Christ, to God? Each church I have served, including this one, has its own mysterious inner life, habits of behaving and speaking that have grown up over time, which sometimes baffle and confuse those who come seeking a relationship with God and to work with following Christ. We speak in language that we assume everyone understands, without really being clear in our own understanding. We press our own personal agendas as the most important thing, unable or unwilling to be open to new people who may bring their own perspectives, gifts, and callings. We become a tightly knit group that has been together for so long that we unintentionally put out vibes of exclusion. The Church of the Covenant was founded upon the importance of living out our faith in small groups. However, it's one thing to be a small group that is centered on spiritual growth and mission; it is quite another to be a small group that just wants to remain a small group. We need to remember that we also have a calling to extend the call of Christ to all people, the call to discipleship, and to be mindful of our peculiarities and habitual patterns of thinking and acting so that they do not become stumbling blocks to those who wish to enter into the life of a disciplined faith.

Jesus also talks about being stumbling blocks to ourselves. He uses some strong, violent imagery. If our hand, foot or eye causes us to stumble, it would be better to get rid of it than to be "thrown into hell." Jesus is underlining the seriousness with which we need to examine our lives. Let us take these words as images. Our "hands" represent the work we do, the ways in which we touch things and people, what we hold onto and what we let go of. Our "feet" represent the ways in which we walk, literally and figuratively, each day. What is the direction of our life? What sorts of places and directions comprise our daily living? Are we "walking" only in places of affluence and power, or do we also walk in the places of human need and deprivation? Do we walk peacefully each day, or do we stomp around in anger or dissatisfaction, or race around mindlessly, hardly aware of what or who is around us? Our "eyes" might represent the way we look at life and other people. Do we look at the world as a hostile place, full of evil, our eyes darting here and there because we trust no one and suspect everyone of the worst? Do we give our eyes to hours of watching television or sitting in front of computer monitors, instead of reading or watching a bird or a flower, or looking into the eyes of our friend or loved one? Do we look upon other people as competitors or strangers or enemies, or as children of God?

Jesus may not have really meant for us to cut off a hand or foot, or pluck out an eye. He may have said this for effect. But he really was seriously about taking stock of how we use our bodies, minds, and time. Are we working, walking, and looking in spiritually healthy directions? Or are we putting stumbling blocks on our own path?

### Keeping Our Salt

Finally, Jesus talks about salt. There is something in salt that makes it salt. If that "something" is lost, the salt is no good any longer. It's not even salt. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." You give life its taste. You preserve what is most important in life. But Jesus has a word of warning. We can lose our saltiness. As his followers, we can lose that which makes us the kind of persons and communities that bring a life-giving difference to the world. Jesus never comes out and says what that "saltiness" is. Yet in light of everything he's said so far, it must have something to do with the seriousness with which we take our faith and try to live it out. It must have something to do with growing closer and closer to God so that we become, as it were, transparent to God. We are concerned less with what others are doing and more with the integrity of our own life and faith. We are increasingly

open to what others have to give us, as well as to what we have to offer. We take great care to get ourselves out of the way so that others can come to God, to Christ. We take seriously the examination of our own lives to perceive those things that are keeping us from living as closely as we can to God and to life as it is meant to be lived.

Keep salt in yourselves, says Jesus, and be at peace with each other. I think there is a connection between those two statements. If we are each taking responsibility for our own faith and faithfulness to Christ, each of us living more deeply into God, then we will find more peace among us. We stop putting demands and expectations on others. We stop trying to control others in order to have them the way we think they should be. We become so engaged in carrying our own crosses of faithfulness that we don't have time or energy to be scrutinizing everyone else. We find that we have quite enough to work on with our own capacities for forgiveness, compassion, understanding, and service to others, and don't have an ounce of energy or a split second left over to try to manage everyone else. This creates a peace that emerges when each person is embodying Christ more and more, and thus the whole community is becoming more Christ-like. This is not a false peace of pretending to get along or like each other. It is the true peace of Christ, his love that accepts the reality of the person, with all the quirks, irritations, unhealthiness, and woundedness, as well as the gifts, the uniqueness, the beauty of each.

Being as faithful as we can, without falling into pride.

Receiving as well as giving, creating a community of hospitality.

Being mindful of stumbling blocks to others and ourselves.

Keeping the saltiness of our deepening love of and devotion to God.

Being at peace with one another.

These things make us a true community of Christ, a community that makes a difference in the world.