

Keeping Our Salt

Mark 9:38-50 *“Have salt in yourselves,
and be at peace with one another.”*

Today is World Communion Sunday and the fifty-second anniversary of the Church of the Covenant. Those who are recommitting to membership will do so as part of this special day for our church community. This church was born out of a belief that church membership is not automatic or casual. It is a matter of intention and commitment. We see the church as a community of persons responding to Christ’s call to follow him in their own time with their own unique lives.

Each year members review and renew their commitments as they feel called by God. Our response to Jesus’ call to discipleship needs to be in complete freedom and responsibility. It means seeking to live each day centered in God and God’s loving purposes for the world. The spiritual disciplines or practices that we commit ourselves to are to help us remain spiritually focused and grounded. Christian discipleship is a journey of growing deeper into our relationship with God, and living out of that relationship in the various ways God calls us to serve according to the gifts God gives us.

When I first read the passage from Mark’s gospel for today, it seemed perfect for this day of recommitment. My attention was grabbed by the closing words of the passage: “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” Keeping our saltiness and being at peace with each other are exactly what we are about as a community of Christ. And yet, this is a tough passage of scripture!

John complains to Jesus that someone is using Jesus’ name to cast out demons. They tried to stop this fellow because he was not a part of their group. But Jesus is strangely untroubled. So what if there is someone out there doing good things in my name? So what if this guy is not part of our religious group? Jesus is more interested in people doing “deeds of power” that liberate and heal than in protecting his territory. Earlier in Mark’s gospel, Jesus said a similar thing. His family comes to a house where he is teaching. When told that his mother and siblings are outside asking for him, Jesus says: “Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?” He looks around the room and says, “Here is my family! Everyone who does God’s will is part of my family.”

We get caught up in evaluating other people, churches, or religions, whether they are doing things the “right” way, which usually means our way. We might indulge in a bit of spiritual pride at our history and the kind of church we try to be. If so, we are off the mark. The point is stay focused on who we are called to be and to be as faithful as we can

be to who we say we are. Whoever is doing something good in Jesus' name, that's great! Whoever treats us kindly because we are trying to do good in Jesus' name, that's great! We just need to keep coming back to ourselves and our own commitments and spiritual journeys. That is what we are accountable for. The spirit of our commitment should be: No matter what others are doing or not doing, this is what I am going to do with my life, this is the commitment I am going to make. And I am going to live it as fully as I can. Meanwhile, we hold in prayer and thankfulness all of those anywhere who are living out their faith in ways that bring healing to this world.

The hardest part of the reading comes next! If you put a stumbling block in front of one of "these little ones who believe in me," says Jesus, you might as well be drowned in the ocean! Each person's relationship with God and desire to follow Jesus must be honored and respected. Yes, someone may seem to us to be immature. Someone may not want to do things the way we would or think the way we do. So be it! We must be sure that we leave each other room to be who and what God wants us to be now. There is nothing more deadening to the movement of God's spirit in the present moment than attachment to the past or to habitual ways of acting and thinking. Nothing dampens the faith of a person coming into the community quicker than, "We've never done it that way before" or "We tried that already and it didn't work" or "You need to do things THIS way."

Each of us needs to cultivate a spiritual awareness that enables us to see how we might be throwing stumbling blocks in front of other people and what God is calling them to do. The Greek word used here is *skandolon*, literally stumbling block or obstacle or offense. It is whatever we do that gets in the way of another person's faithfulness to what God is calling them to be and do. It may be our cynicism, our anger, our own disappointments, or our desire to control things that give off vibes of discouragement. But if we are working first of all with our own spiritual journeys, we will be able to give others the freedom they need and we will be able to have the clarity of vision to perceive the gifts they bring and turn them loose to be what God made them to be and do what God calls them to do.

Jesus' words get even tougher! If your hand or foot or eye causes you to stumble, get rid of it. It is getting blocking your relationship with God and what God is calling you to do. It is a *skandalon*, an obstacle between you and God's kingdom, the fullness of life God promises. Of utmost importance and value is the life Jesus seeks to lead us into, the life of living in and living out of God's love. We all encounter stumbling blocks, obstacles to that life, within us and around us. Jesus is engaging in hyperbole. That's a fancy word for "over the top." He is exaggerating things so that we get the point--the fullness of life we desire and which he offers is not gained without letting go of some things, throwing some

baggage overboard. Our addictions, our attachments, our views of life that are skewed but to which we cling because they are comfortable. Whatever it is, says Jesus, do the work of letting them go so that you have clearer access to life the way God wants you to live.

An important part of our inward journey work is becoming more aware of those habits of living and thinking that cause us frustration and pain, yet to which we continue to cling. Then we perceive ways to stop doing the old, painful things and do the things that bring new life. There is an aphorism familiar in mental health circles: What is the definition of neurosis? It is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results! The inward journey of prayer, meditation, and self-awareness helps to allow our capacity for love to grow larger than our habits of judging and rejecting, our capacity for forgiveness to grow larger than our habits of holding grudges and nursing our bruised egos, our capacity for spiritual courage and freedom to grow larger than our fears and self-doubts.

There is a famous Buddhist story. Someone came to the Buddha to learn how to overcome his suffering. So the Buddha offered this parable. A soldier in battle was struck by a poisoned arrow. When a friend rushed to his aid and started to pull out the arrow, the soldier said, Wait! First I want to know who shot the arrow, what province he came from, what kind of arrow it was, where it was made, who made it, and what kind of poison was on it's tip. By then, it was too late and the soldier died. The point is to pull out the arrow. What is it in me that keeps me full of spiritual pain and emptiness? What is it in me that is getting in the way of a fuller relationship with God? What is keeping me from living more fully this one precious life God has given me? We can waste time blaming the world or other people. We can sit around discussing many fine theological and spiritual theories. We can sink into self-pity and see ourselves as victims. Or we can see the poisoned arrow in our own lives and pull it out.

Jesus is saying, Don't put stumbling blocks in each others' way or in your own way. And if there is a stumbling block, an obstacle standing between you and the life of God's kingdom, the most important spiritual work you can do is to remove it. It isn't easy. And it can be painful. But it is worth it!

Finally, Jesus talks about salt and fire. Everyone will be salted with fire. That's a mind-blowing mixed metaphor! We can't make rational sense out of it. It is meant to wake us up! For me it means that life itself is like being salted with fire. Fire is an image of purification or making an offering. We are given many opportunities to live at the deepest, most meaningful level. But we are also living in a human world that is full of illusions and false trails. The challenge is to keep seeking what is real and true and good. Salt is an image for preserving or curing. Jesus was calling people to the kind of life that has real meaning and purpose, and yet a life that asked something of them. He was calling

people to live according to their true, God-created selves in a world that offers every kind of distraction.

In Matthew's gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the crowd that they ARE the salt of the earth. Why? Because he sees that they have not completely lost their desire for God and for the life God created them to live. As confused, wounded, misguided, or oppressed as they may have become, there was still something there, down deep, something that was their true identity, their salt. But if that salt is lost, if it become tasteless, it is of no use whatsoever. As followers of Jesus, we try to live so that the challenges and struggles of life become a purifying fire that enables us to keep our saltiness, our desire and hunger for God.

Jesus closes with an admonition: Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. Keep your saltiness. Keep your desire for God. Keep your desire to commit your lives to following Jesus. Keep giving your spiritual life a framework of spiritual disciplines or practices that help ground you in God. It is not an easy path, but it is one that is in harmony with our truest selves and that brings fullness of life.

If we are each living our lives focused on our own relationships with God and our commitments to that relationship, then we will grow in our capacity to be at peace with each other. We will grow in our respect for each other and the ways each of us is working with his or her commitment. We will share our struggles as we seek to live out this call of Jesus to the life of prayer and ministry, the inward and outward journeys of our lives. We will grow closer together because each of us is growing deeper in our relationship with the God in whom we have our common being.