

Keeping Our Saltiness, Being at Peace

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

Next Sunday is World Communion Sunday and the fifty-fifth anniversary of the Church of the Covenant. It is our annual re-commitment Sunday, when some will be choosing for another year to live out of an intentional spiritual life as Covenant or Community Members. Our community was born out of a belief that being Jesus' community is not automatic or casual. It is a way of life, an intentional and committed response with our whole lives to God's gracious love embodied in Jesus. That response must be completely free, not motivated by guilt, compulsion, fear, or anything other than love. The spiritual disciplines or practices that we work with are to help us remain spiritually focused, grounded, and growing. Christian discipleship is a journey of deepening and clarifying our relationship with God, in the ways we feel God calls us to serve, using the gifts God gives us.

Jesus' closing words in our reading from Mark could serve well as the theme for this time of re-commitment: “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.

This is a tough piece of scripture! John, one of the disciples, complains to Jesus that someone is using Jesus' name to cast out demons. “We tried to stop this fellow because he is not a part of our group.” Jesus is untroubled. So what if there is someone out there liberating people from the things that are stealing their lives? So what if this guy is not part of our group? Jesus is more interested in mission than in ego stuff, like protecting his territory or being in control of everything and everyone. Earlier in Mark's gospel (3:31-35), Jesus said a similar thing. His family comes to a house where he is teaching. When told that his mother and brothers 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 or not they are doing things the “right” way, which usually means our way. We may indulge in spiritual pride at our own history and the kind of church we try to be. If so, we are missing the mark. The point is to 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 are grateful for all anywhere who are living out their faith in ways that bring healing to this world.

The passage gets more challenging. 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. Someone may seem to us immature, or not do things the way we would or think the way we do. So be it! We must leave others room to be who and what God wants them to be and do.

We need to cultivate the spiritual awareness to see how we might be putting stumbling blocks in others' relationship with God. The Greek word used here is *skandalon*, literally scandal 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 own cynicism, anger, disappointments, or desire to control things that create an atmosphere of discouragement. It may be our thinking that what WE feel called to do is what EVERYONE should be doing. If we are working first of all with our own spiritual journeys, we will be able to give others the freedom they need. We will 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 is calling them to do.

Jesus' words get even more challenging! If your hand or foot or eye causes you to stumble, get rid of it. It is getting in the way of 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 offers. Of utmost importance and value is the life Jesus calls us to, 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, 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 sometimes painful work of letting it go so that you have a clearer path to fullness of life.

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 keep clinging. Then we can 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, study, 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 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 keep nursing old grudges and resentments and hurts. 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 another's way, or in your own way. If there is 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. What does it mean to be "salted with fire"? For me it means that the life of faith itself is like being salted with fire. Fire is an image of purification or making an offering. We are called 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 the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), Jesus tells the crowd that they ARE the salt of the earth. Why? Because he sees that they still have a desire for God and for the life God created them to live. As confused, wounded, misguided, or oppressed as they may have become, there is still something there, down deep, their true identity, their salt. But if that salt is lost, if it become tasteless, it is of no use. 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 and even strengthen our saltiness, our desire and hunger for God and the life to which God calls us.

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 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 leads to 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.