

September 27, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Keeping Our Saltiness, Being at Peace

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

Next Sunday is our annual re-commitment Sunday, when some will be choosing for another year to live an intentional spiritual life as Covenant or Community Members. Others will be making a commitment for the first time. Our community was born out of a belief that being Jesus' community 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. We believe that Jesus calls us to an inward journey of deepening our relationship with God, and an outward journey of serving life in the particular ways we feel called, using the gifts God gives each one of us.

The covenant we make and the disciplines to which we commit are, we might say, like the law or precepts that Psalm 19 praises. For Israel, the law was not seen as something external imposed upon us, something outside our humanity. The law was seen as a gift, a blessing from God, something that guided the lives of people in true ways of living. That is the way we understand our disciplines, or practices. They lead us and ground us in who we truly are as those created by God. They enable us to live out the all-fulfilling commandment to love God with our whole being, and to love others as we love ourselves.

This way of being the church is so that we keep our “saltiness,” which Jesus talks about with his disciples. Jesus' closing words in our reading from Mark are a good 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 at the core of who we are as a community.

The passage from Mark's gospel 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 doing people some good and using Jesus' name? So what if this guy is not part of our group, doing things the way we do them? 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." Notice, he does not even say everyone who follows me! No. Everyone who does what God wants us to do as human beings.

Now, there are many instances historically and today of people who call themselves Christian doing harm, and we need to be concerned about that and be willing to speak about it. However, we often 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 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. 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. There is a simple and wonderful verse from ancient Buddhist teachings, called the Dhammapada: "Do not give your attention to what others do or fail to do; give it to what you do or fail to do." 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 call to which I am going to respond. Meanwhile, we are grateful for all anywhere who are living out their faith in ways that bring some healing to this world, whether they are "one of us" or not! And that includes people of other spiritual traditions. Remember Jesus' words - "All who do the will of God." "In my name" means doing the things Jesus was about, not invoking his name over whatever

it is we are doing.

So, when we make our commitment to membership, it is a commitment to give attention to our own life in God and in relation to others and the world. It is our desire to embrace responsibility for all the gifts God has given us, including the very gift of our life, and to live out of that awareness in loving ways, and to do so regardless of what others are doing or not doing.

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 way of following Jesus must be honored and respected. Someone may seem to us immature, or not doing things the way we would. So be it! We must leave others room to be who and what God wants them to be and do. We do not have to agree with them. We do not have to condemn them. We offer them the same freedom we claim for ourselves, to live out God’s call and love within the uniqueness of our own lives, with as much understanding as we have at any given time.

We need to cultivate our self-awareness to see how we might be putting stumbling blocks in others’ relationship with God. The Greek word used here is *skandolon*, literally scandal or obstacle or offense. Let me bring this home with the way the church has related to children, and to some of us when we were children. The dominant spiritual story Christianity has taught to children--and adults--has been: You are a sinner; you are born that way; God sent his son Jesus to die for your sins and so that you can go to heaven. Does that not make you feel better? No it does not. It does not make sense to children. It does not make sense to reasonable adults. And it is built on a sliver of scripture, while ignoring the dominant message of scripture. That message is that we are created good (Gen. 1). There is no such thing as original sin, that is, we are born sinners, cut off from God. Jesus never talked that way. Most of scripture does not talk that way. And as long as the church continues that same narrative, it is throwing a stumbling block in front of these “little ones”, whether they are children or adults, who are longing for something spiritual that they can sink their teeth into. The message is: you are created by God, and you are good; you are called to a life of prayer—the inward journey—and service to others and the world—

the outward journey; and you have been given gifts with which to serve others and the world. That is what our community is about, and is what we believe Jesus was about.

Jesus' words get even more challenging! If your hand or foot or eye causes you to stumble, get rid of it. It is a *skandalon*, an obstacle between you and God's kingdom, the fullness of life God created us to live. Of utmost importance and value is the life to which Jesus calls us, 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--fullness of life 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, the life you were created to live, not what the culture around you calls 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. 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 the fears and self-doubts that keep us from being who God made us to be and doing what we feel God has put us on this earth to do.

There is a famous Buddhist story. Someone came to the Buddha to learn how to overcome his suffering. So the Buddha told this famous 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 its 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 causes my suffering? What is it in me that

is getting in the way of a fuller awareness of and relationship with the everywhere present God? What is keeping me from living more fully this one precious life God has given me? What is it that is keeping me from doing the thing I most deeply feel called to do for others, for the world? I had lunch with Gordon Cosby one day some years ago at the Potter's House in D.C. We were talking about call and resistance to call. He told me of a recent conversation he had with someone right there in the Potter's House. This person was sharing with Gordon his or her struggles to go forward and do what she or he felt called to do. The thing is, Gordon finally said after listening a good while, you have been saying the same thing to me for over ten years! 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. We can come up with all the reasons why we think it would be difficult to do what we feel called to do. 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 to which you feel God is calling you, the most important spiritual work you can do is to remove it. It is not easy. And it can be painful. But it is worth it!

Finally, Jesus speaks in an awkward image. Everyone will be salted with fire. Jesus said a lot of things to stir up our imaginations, the "meditations of our hearts", as Psalm 19 says. For me this means that the life of faith itself is like being salted with fire. Fire is an image of purification. We are called to live at the deepest, most meaningful level, to burn away all that keeps us from it. 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, and to let everything else burn away. 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. When we are living in that way—being salted with fire--as persons and a community, it is not only good for us but also for the world.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), Jesus tells the crowd that they ARE the salt of the earth, as well as the light of the world. He sees the good in them, that

they 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, their true identity, their salt. But if that salt is lost, if it becomes 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 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 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 own lives in this way, 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. As we strive to keep our saltiness and to be at peace with one another, we will be salt and light in the world. This is what we are about as we come to another time of commitment. This is the way we as a community will continue to keep our saltiness and be at peace with one another, and a source of peace for all.