

Sunday, September 26, 2021
Mark 9:38-50 + "Well-Seasoned"
Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, WI
Rev. Nancy Raabe, Pastor

I love seasonings, as I'm sure everyone does who likes to cook. Our son Martin has taught me a lot about different spices. My original go-to was Montreal Chicken. Then I discovered a wonderful Middle Eastern concoction called Holy Land Spice Blend. More recently my favorite seasoning has become smoked paprika.

But the mother of all seasonings, of course, is salt. In cooking as well as eating, salt is indispensable. If you've ever been put on a strict salt-free diet, you probably had the same experience as Bill's mother did, who had to endure that for a year. She said food was basically tasteless.

But today Jesus says not to eat salt but to BE salt: "Have salt in yourselves." What in the world does he mean? He isn't calling for us to become salty characters in the commonly understood sense of a someone who is bitter, angry, irritated or hard to take--a salty personality. I think we can figure out what Jesus is saying from the context.

First, if we look at today's entire reading, we see that it's really about discipleship, meaning how Jesus' followers are to lead others to him. In our discipleship, we are all leaders. The word apostle means "to follow," but we are leaders just as Jesus' disciples were.

At the beginning of today's Gospel reading, though, they have gotten tangled up in their own self-importance. Someone outside of their group has been performing exorcisms, and John arrogantly objects. He is under the impression that only the chosen 12 should be casting out evil spirits, which Jesus did give them the power to do a few chapters earlier.

But as Jesus makes clear, his ministry is to be carried on by anyone who desires to be his disciple. "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." And since the goal of God in Christ is to reconcile the world in God's love, ultimately bringing peace to the whole earth and to the entire cosmos, our ministry is that of peace--accomplished through salt.

In the Old Testament, having salt signifies being at peace--not a temporary truce but an enduring condition. In Leviticus 2:13 we read, "You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." In Numbers 18:19 God describes all the holy offerings the people make as "a covenant of salt forever before the Lord." In Ezra 4:14 we find a reference to sharing salt during a meal as a sign of fellowship. Who would have think this sentence that we so often speak at the dinner table has such significance? "Please pass the salt." "Of course, my friend. And peace be with you."

The central calling to bring peace to the world by loving and serving our neighbor is what Jesus means when he says we should have salt in ourselves. Salt is the indispensable seasoning that brings out the true flavor of food. Having salt in ourselves means bringing out the true quality of our discipleship in Christ, which is to bring peace. Salt, sodium chloride, is one of the most stable compounds on earth. It never breaks down. Real salt never loses its saltiness.

The call through Christ to love and serve our neighbor is like salt. It is indelible. It is who we are. Once we decide to follow Jesus, we can never lose that.

But we get off track at times because we are human, for as Paul says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Mired in our personal agendas, we inflict injuries on others that cause them to stumble. Our hand - we grab for that which is not ours. Our foot - we tread on territory that is not ours. Our eye - we look on others with selfish intent. Of course we are causing ourselves to stumble as well. And the remedy? Jesus says, Cut off your hand. Cut off your foot. Tear out your eye. Of course he doesn't really mean this - he is trying to shock us out of self-complacency. He is trying to wake us up to the effects of our recklessness.

But here is what I want you to know. God sees all this and, even still, continues to call you into discipleship, because God loves you and you are enough. In your baptism God set the seal of the cross, the promise of forgiveness, upon your heart. It is imprinted there. Nothing can change that. Because of this, your discipleship, in whatever form it takes, is precious to God. No matter how inadequate you might feel, you are enough. No matter whether you doubt that you have the right words to bring to difficult situations, you are enough. No matter whether you think what you have to offer isn't what's needed, you are enough. No matter how you recognize you have caused others to stumble, you are enough.

When Jesus says, “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another,” he is calling us, even in our stumbling ways, to be ambassadors of reconciliation. He is calling us to bring peace to the world through the reconciling truth of who he is and what God, through the cross, has done for us. God loves us dearly and forgives us fully, forgiveness that we absolutely do not deserve. And confirmation students, what is the word for forgiveness that we do not deserve but which God freely gives us anyway? Grace.

As we will sing in a few minutes, Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And what is the prayer at the end of that communion song? “Grant us peace; grant us peace.” Have salt in yourselves, and bring peace to a world that desperately needs it.

Amen.