

Mark 9:38-50, 2015

John said to [Jesus,] “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us.⁴¹ 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.

⁴²“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire.⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

Mark 9:38-50, 2015

Typically when we read the assigned gospel lesson for the week some theme or central message emerges without a lot of strain,

although I know upon further study Jesus will often surprise us..

Today's gospel lesson, however, sounds like, and may very well be, a series of unconnected sayings of Jesus the author of Mark has strung together for some reason unknown to us.

We have the verses about cutting off hands and feet and tearing our eyes.

When we get down to the end in verses 49 through 50 there seems to be something missing.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire.”⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

Now what does all that mean?

If we take a look at the word salt we might make some connection.

Salt, in our day, has some fairly negative connotations to it, and at the same time some benefits.

Salt has been identified as the cause of some health problems

The Harvard School of Public Health says

- People over age 50
- People who have high or slightly elevated blood pressure, and

- People who have diabetes are at risk of developing health problems due to salt consumption.

At the same time there are those who believe that salt is so necessary to our health and that limiting salt in your diet will in fact shorten your life span.

I am not a doctor so you are going to have to figure that one out for yourself.

Now that I have muddied up those waters, I think it is safe to say that salt is beneficial in melting snow and ice on roadways and sidewalks, and as a softening agent for the water you use in your home.

In our gospel lesson salt is used in a couple of ways; as seasoning and as a preservative.

Jesus speaks of salt as seasoning in verse 50 of this gospel lesson.

⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?

There is a man in the lesson who is part of the seasoning of his community, and the community of the disciples, although they aren't crazy about the flavor.

He is the man who is casting our demons in Jesus' name, and the disciples try to stop him,

and they try to stop him because he is not a part of their group.

We have already heard the story about the disciples arguing about which of them is the greatest so this should not be much of a surprise.

If they understand themselves to be the greatest how is this outsider going to have any standing in Jesus' community?

We find a very similar story in the book of Numbers just after 70 elders of the community of Israel received the Holy Spirit to help Moses lead the people while they were wandering around in the wilderness.

While that is going on two men who remained in camp were found to be prophesying;

A gift of the same spirit the other seventy just received.

Joshua, one of the chosen elders goes to complain to Moses who says, stop!

I wish all the people had the gift. Imagine what kind of community we would have then!

I believe that Jesus is providing some instruction about the community of faith to the disciples.

Where are its boundaries? What does it look like? How is it defined? Who is in charge?

Clearly the disciples think that behind Jesus they are in the position to make these judgments.

But Jesus takes this opportunity to teach again, to expand their vision of what the Kingdom of God here on earth looks like.

“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

That swings the door wide open, doesn't it?

You are aware of the tension between how we understand God's presence in the world and how others do:

Different understanding of how to read the scriptures; literally or not;

Different understanding of the sacraments;

And then beyond those two significant issues there are many others that have to do with worship, music, social ministry, advocacy, participation in the political arena and the list goes on and on.

It seems that according to Jesus the litmus test is;

In whose name is the ministry, or in whose name is the work being done?

Is it in Jesus' name and is it faithful to Jesus' teachings and the criteria He set for being one of His followers?

You remember that—taking up your cross, taking up the gospel to serve and to be last rather than first.

There are some boundaries, but they are established by Jesus.

The community of faith looks like a community that loves and serves others. It is a community defined by God's love and grace in Jesus Christ lived and shared with others.

It is a community of Jesus followers who give their lives to Him and allow Him to be in charge of every part of life.

Now Jesus knows the disciples, nor the rest of His followers throughout time, including us, are not going to be perfect in all these things.

He doesn't let us off the hook however when He uses this literary device, hyperbole, this exaggerated statement about what to do about our shortcomings.

Drown in the sea?

Cut off the hand, your foot?

Pluck out your eye?

We wonder, what in the world is Jesus, not just meaning, but expecting--that we really cut off our hands and feet and pluck out our eyes?

I believe this is where the other use of the word "salt" as preservative comes to bear.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire...Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

This part of the passage sounds like everyone will be purified in this process of being salted with fire, and in the end we know that may be so as Christ stands before the seat of judgment and proclaims your innocence through His death and resurrection.

In that promise there is great hope for each of us, but I believe Jesus is not just talking about the life to come, but the community of faith in this world, in His day and our time.

For Mark there are those commentators who say that as he shares Jesus' words he is speaking to a community that is having some problems and there are some who are compromising the integrity of the faith community.

The cutting off and the plucking out then are the means of dealing with those who are dragging this young developing community of faith down.

In today's context I am not sure that is the message we need to be proclaiming, and certainly not the message I intend to deliver.

I want to talk about how salt preserves.

How many of you have eaten Virginia ham?

Now there is some salty food. That ham is salt cured.

Curing food with salt is a method of preserving food that goes way back to the times when there were no refrigerators or ice boxes, and it was very effective.

Salt curing was used on all sorts of food.

Most of us don't do that anymore.

When Jesus says everyone will be “salted with fire” he is talking about our preservation.

We are His and in His death and resurrection we are preserved as His people and live in the hope of the life to come yes,

But also live in the love and hope He offers in this life.

You will not be pure in this life. You will make mistakes. You will fall short of His glory,

And He will preserve you as salt preserves ham. This is God’s promise.

Jesus says “...have that preservative in yourself and be at peace with one another.”

Be at peace.

Here Mark points at the discord in his own community by using Jesus’ calling to living in peace with one another, respect for one another, preserving each person’s dignity, loving one another.

This ministry, whether it is casting out demons, healing, teaching, whatever it is, is not about any one person or even group of 12.

It is about a community.

The elders of Moses’ community, Jesus’ disciples, we are called to let God decide

where the boundaries are, what the community of faith looks like, how it is defined because He is in charge?

That is our only hope as a community of faith, as well as our personal hope for this life and the next.

Amen