

The Reverend Martha Harris, Priest in Charge  
Saint Paul and Saint Luke Episcopal Churches

Sermon - Sunday September 29, 2024 10 am Columbia Crossing Visitor Center

Scripture

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Psalms 19: 7-14

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

“Have Salt in Yourselves, and Be At Peace with one Another”



Primary Messages

- Challenging the power of evil
- Love of neighbor - not to gain reward, but to offer love in the name of Christ
- Powerful self corrective to the disciples concerned about their exclusive right to heal the world.
- Easy to stumble when the desire to be first overcomes our ability to be humble co-laborers with God.
- Provides a road map for discipleship in the Jesus Movement.
- Instead of division, each one seeking to be the greatest, there should be acceptances rather than competition
- Salt was used in the Ancient Near East to purify and store meats in the absence of refrigeration.
- “No one who does a deed of power in the name of Jesus Christ will be able to speak evil of me.”

Good morning. This service is being held in the midst of God's creation - the Susquehanna River flowing behind us - (rain/wind) serve as reminders that ultimately, God is in charge.

Jesus' teaching of his reluctant disciples is hard to hear when our Christian faith is being used by some as a political weapon. We need to listen closely - and decipher through Jesus' words what he means as he and his disciples approach Jerusalem - during Jesus' final journey to the cross. We need to cut through the noise when a lot of people are proclaiming to be followers of Jesus and doing deeds in his name that don't agree with our understanding of Jesus' nonviolent ministry, or match what Jesus is telling his disciples in this passage. (CN)

The passage begins with John telling Jesus that they saw someone casting out demons in his name. Exorcism - the process of casting demons out is not limited to Jesus. Jesus reassures John and his fellow disciples that anyone who does a deed of power in his name will not be able to speak ill of him afterward

Yet Jesus warns his disciples to not put a stumbling block before little ones who believe in him. To do so would merit punishment as if someone put a millstone around your neck and dropped you into the sea. I saw a millstone on Friday evening on the grounds of Lancaster History. It must weigh a ton - and is NOT something you want to be carrying around your neck if you are thrown into a body of water.

Hell - or eternal damnation - figures prominently in the next three sentences. Jesus warns that important body parts would be cut off if you put stumbling blocks between him and his believers.

“It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell: the unquenchable fire”

Contemporary theologians have moved away from the hell and damnation analogies to a new definition of sin as anything that separates us from God.

Our actions, our words, our thoughts - are all ripe grounds for sin.

We worship a forgiving God. We confess our sins publicly before we receive communion. Crucial to our faith is the belief that God exists for ALL of us and that we all have the opportunity to renounce our sin and be redeemed.

Jesus's final teachings of his reluctant disciples on the path to Jerusalem and his ultimate passion, (death on the cross and resurrection) are cascading examples of tough love. In this passage, He is increasingly concerned that his disciples don't fully grasp their role as co-laborers with God. You can almost hear the frustration in his voice, and the need to expand their reach to engage all who are seeking a closer relationship with God through Jesus.

He reiterates his support for the least among us - children and those on the margins of society.

He cautions us all to not put stumbling blocks in front of the little ones who believe in Him, saying it would be better to put millstones around our own necks and be thrown into the sea.

Similarly if a part of our physical body, or community, causes us to stumble we should cut them off - beginning with our hands, our feet and our eyes.

It's hard to understand what Jesus is telling us in these gory images.

Like many passages in the Gospel and throughout the Bible, prophets, including Jesus, speak in parables - using allegories to illustrate the meaning of their stories.

This passage is one of the most grotesque because of Jesus' focus on human body parts.

It's important to not take these images literally - but rather to think of these essential elements of our bodies as symbols - the work of our hands, the walk of our feet, and the vision of our eyes. If any of those parts are missing due to disease or sin, we should consider cutting them off so we can be purified before God.

And that is where salt comes in. Salt was not just used to flavor food, but rather to preserve food in the Ancient Near East when refrigeration was not available to prevent spoilage.

Salt is a PURIFYING agent - in this passage, salt is used by Christ to illustrate the need to purify ourselves and our communities from sin - disdain for others who don't look like us or worship like us is a sin. Dislike of those who are not on the inside - members of our faith community can lead to the sin of excessive inclusivity - to the isolation and rejection of those who don't belong.

Our faith communities need to be open to the breezes of the Holy Spirit - like we are feeling today. When we truly have love in our hearts for our family, our friends and others, we are in alignment with God. When we carry in our hearts the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ and his universal love of all of us, we are truly co-laborers of God - helping to create his Kingdom, overcoming stumbling blocks in our search for the universal truth that we are all connected and depend on each other.

As the Psalmist writes, "Keep your servant from presumptuous sins: let them not get dominion over me, then I shall be whole and sound and innocent of a great offense." Psalm 19:13

Jesus and the Psalmist are cautioning us from getting too full of ourselves, pretending that we are better than others and that our needs can be fulfilled without the hard work of others.

Jesus' mission on earth was incomplete at the time of his crucifixion and resurrection. His passion inspires us to pick up our crosses to serve others in his name.

What does my Lord ask of me?

James 5:20. ...whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's souls from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

Jesus - Mark 9:38-50. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

We may have different definitions of salty people. An old salt is someone who works near the ocean, spends a lot of time near the water. A salty person is someone who has a sharp sense of humor and laughs often. A salty person is someone who is a little spicier, braver than others. Salt in our wounds means an extension of pain.

In Jesus' context - he is using salt as a purifying agent. A preservative of the relationship between us and God. To be the salt of the earth is to emulate God, offering loving kindness, forgiveness, empathy and compassion to all - especially to those most vulnerable and in need.

As members of faith communities, we can help preserve our saltiness - through acts of compassion and generosity that extend beyond our individual capabilities. Our individual and collective acts of selfless love will mark us as disciples of the one true holy and everlasting Jesus Christ.

Amen