



“Have Salt in Yourselves”

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Mark 9:38-50

We played a really fun game at Children’s Camp this year. In our missions time, Laura and I focused on the scripture in Matthew which says we are the salt of the earth and a light to the world. So, during the first day when we talked about what it meant to be the salt of the earth, we used salty foods to play a tasting game. We had five rows of kids and one kid would have blindfolded eyes. We would then hand the kid a small cup with a salty food in it. The blindfolded child would have to taste the item and guess what it was simply by the smell and salty taste of the food. Some kids got lucky and sampled the caramel popcorn or the peanut butter candy. Others were not as lucky. They had to consume pickled asparagus, tomato juice, and even sardines. It was fun to connect these secret salty foods to the missions lesson of the day – that we need to be the salt of the earth, flavoring the world with love and peace.

Over the past several weeks, we’ve seen Jesus move back and forth between the borders and edges of Gentile territory, up onto a mountain where Jesus was transfigured in front of a few close friends, and then back into the heart of Israel. And on these trips, Jesus tried to tell his followers and even show them what kind of Messiah he would be and what it meant to suffer and take up their crosses to follow him. But the disciples continued to time after time after time to misunderstand Jesus. They thought that being salt and bringing flavor to the world was all about power and might and prestige. But just like too much salt in food, the need for tribalism and exclusion and supremacy can make the world bitter and unappealing. And what we find in our text today is that disciples continued to misunderstand Jesus and what being a follower of the suffering servant actually meant. These disciples were rather salty. For you see, they questioned Jesus concerning an exorcist who was not one of them and was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. He “was not following us.”

And I guess the disciples expected Jesus to rebuke such a bold person, as Jesus often rebuked them when they failed to believe the right things about him. But instead of rebuke, Jesus, as usual, used the awkward occasion to teach the disciples. We must remember that waging the battle against evil, against demons, against unclean spirits is a central theme in Mark and is mentioned dozens of times. In fact, the first public act of Jesus’ ministry was casting out the unclean spirit from a man in the synagogue in Capernaum. And in this instance, as well as in all the other instances, demonic possession was finally overcome in the name of Jesus, which is what this unknown exorcist was doing: “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name.”

And Jesus’ teaching moment came through his words to his disciples: “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of me.” Jesus’ battle against Satan and the ongoing presence of evil was a community effort and took all available resources

and people. And not only was Jesus' ministry against the powers of evil, but his ministry was also about reaching out in love to the neighbor. "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." When the followers of Jesus worked together, despite their differences, to rid the world of evil, people were healed, people were brought back into community, people were made whole.

We are called to serve our neighbors, to be servants of all... not to be the greatest or to gain a reward, or to be in the "in" group. We are called to serve one another with love in order to be at peace with our neighbors and in the name of Christ. For if we do, evils will leave our land. Demons will be cast out of our city. Racism will be cast out. Fear of other faiths will be cast out. Division will be cast out. Privilege will be cast out. Worldly power will be cast out. And all that will be left will be the precious salt within ourselves and a peace that passes understanding, a peace that perseveres and endures.

But how does salt bring peace? Why salt? Why do we need salt in ourselves? There are numerous references to salt in the Hebrew Scriptures. Salt was a form of connection between God's people and God. It was put on the altar in the Temple as a symbol of covenant and purity. It was also a currency and valuable for trade. But I think for the disciples, they had heard many of Jesus's parables and teachings, about small things, especially the mustard seed and light. And although salt, like light and the mustard seed, are small, it can be quite powerful. One tiny crystal of salt can be tasted, can change the flavor of anything. It doesn't take much salt to flavor the world.

But have we, today, traded flavor for favor? Have we become so focused on winning the favor of Jesus, winning the favor of our friends, winning the favor of the lobbyists and millionaires, winning the favor of the elite and the privileged, that we have lost our flavor? That is in our text for this morning. Jesus said, "Salt is good but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?" Or, if salt has lost its flavor what good is it? The flavoring of peace should not be traded for favor. An ancient king once asked his three daughters how much they loved him. One daughter said she loved him more than all the gold in the world. One said she loved him more than all the silver in the world. The youngest daughter said she loved him more than salt. The king was not pleased with this answer. But the cook overheard the conversation, so the next day he prepared a good meal for the king, but left out the salt. The food was so insipid that the king couldn't eat it. Then he understood what his daughter meant. He understood the value of salt.

Jesus asked, "What good is salt if it has lost its flavor, if it no longer seasons food?" Of what value is our work in the kingdom of God if we have lost our flavor? Jesus was saying to his followers, both his disciples of long ago as well as to us today, "What good is it to be a follower of mine if there is nothing distinctive about your life? If by following me you make no real contribution to the life of the world, if there is no redemptive power flowing through your life and actions, what's the use of calling yourselves my disciples?" Have we gained favor and lost our flavor?

I love how The Message bible translates Matthew's salt passage. It says, "Let me tell you why you are here. You're the salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in

the garbage.” Did you hear that? You are the salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. And I think that’s right because The Gospel of Matthew’s focus on the disciples of Jesus being salt comes immediately after Jesus taught the crowds the beatitudes. Blessed are the peacemakers! Right? Being salt in the world is connected to peace! And so, in Mark’s Gospel we see that Jesus wants his followers to have salt in themselves and to be at peace with one another. Salt and peace are always mentioned together. They go together.

And I think more than ever we need salt in ourselves and to be at peace with one another. But that’s so difficult! We live in a world of judgment, and gossip, and vitriol, and hurt. And the disciples weren’t any different than us today. For we see at the very beginning of our text today we get the judgment of the disciple, John. He whined, “We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” We saw someone! That’s how a lot of judgment starts, right? Many of the commentators I read when studying this text think this sounds a lot like tattle-taling. I have two girls, 8 and 6, and that’s what I hear all the time. “I saw!” “I saw Annaleigh disobeying mom!” “I saw Beatrice cutting with the wrong scissors!” “I saw!” But Jesus cut that whining stuff off right there. Jesus knew how the salt of peace seasoned the lives of all his followers. “Don’t stop him! Whoever is not against us is for us. Whoever is not our enemy is an ally!”

As I’m out in the community listening and lifting up the voices of those beaten down by the abuse of power in this city, I am surrounded by clergy, laity, and organizers from every denomination, every walk of life, and every faith tradition. In the room we are all different and bring diverse gifts and passions to the leadership in the city. Many are way more conservative than I am. Jaime Clark Soles, many other of my clergy colleagues, and I, are on the steering team for a group coming to Dallas in the middle of November called the Red Letter Christian Revival. The Red Letter Christians is a group started by Tony Campolo and Shane Claibourne as they met with Jim Wallis of Sojourner’s magazine to come up with another name for evangelicals who care about living out the words of Jesus to bless and care for those on the margins. The word evangelical has been politicized and polluted so much by the nationalistic Christian right that many faithful followers of a saving Jesus needed a different label for themselves.

Well, one newspaper caught wind of this meeting of justice-centered evangelicals and wrote a scathing piece, saying that they were Christians who cared more about the red letters of the Bible over the black letters, giving emphasis to those words that Jesus actually said and called us to follow. And this new group said “Well, yeah, that’s about right!” And they agreed that was the perfect name for who they were. And so, these Red Letter Christians put on old-school revivals in major cities where people could be excited about Jesus again, but be excited about a Jesus who cares for the poor, and the orphaned, and the widowed, and the outsider rather than cater to the elite and powerful in the top echelons of government.

So, the Red Letter Christians organizers came to Dallas and had a meeting of clergy throughout the DFW Metroplex to gain support and energy for the upcoming revival. In attendance at this meeting last week we had black clergy, white clergy, gay clergy, straight clergy, male, female, progressive and conservative evangelicals. One of the more conservative clergy in the room was a friend and minister from a local Baptist church that is way more conservative than ours. I don’t agree with his theology but we were both in the room to work for justice and mercy and peace in

this city. And it reminded me that I don't want to be like John and say, "I saw this conservative Baptist in the room working for justice in this city but he doesn't follow us. He doesn't believe what we do!" I needed to remember the words of Jesus, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Maybe we need to have more of that in our churches, in our homes, in our courts, in our places of power, in our lives. If we are all working for the good of the least of these and seeking to live out God's kingdom on earth, then we are on the right track to be salt to this city, to bring God-flavoring to Dallas.

Preacher and professor, Karoline Lewis says, "We forget that we are all in the same proverbial boat, or pond, depending on your preferred metaphor. And we need to stick together, not for the sake of an affront against, a battle lodged, or a fight for, but for the sake of camaraderie and collegiality. As soon as our denominations, our church, our faith, becomes that which we need to defend, we've given up on true dialogue and openness to conversation. We've shut the doors and decided that our confessions are better than others." As I said last week, faith isn't about competition. Faith isn't about who is the greatest. Faith is about conversation. It is about support and community. It's about service. Which is why we need this story from Mark, and these words from Jesus. We need the reminder that we are all different and we all must be salt. We, as followers in faith and workers to cast out the demons of this world, need each other, not to prove ourselves right but to realize the right and good and peace that is in one another.

I played violin growing up and I think I was pretty decent. But as a perfectionist, I tried to mimic and copy those who were better than me, those who were older and in higher books in Suzuki, those who sounded better than me. But my teacher, Mrs. Law, knew that the beauty of my playing didn't come when I compared myself to others. She didn't want me to compare myself to anyone but me. She helped me remember that I am unique and have my own beautiful gifts. I needed to let go of competition and expectation.

The goal of our faith is not to win. I know that we've had heavy doses of Charlie Sheen who used the catch phrase winning, and it changed to #winning, and we have elected officials who would say and do anything to win and to be in power. The goal of believing and having faith is not who can be better or, like we saw last week with the arguing disciples, who is the greatest. The goal of being a Christian is not about comparison or contrast. We all have a job to do to cast out the demons in this world and to flavor the world with peace. So, when we are tempted to say, "we saw someone" and complain that someone isn't exactly like us, maybe "we saw someone" needs to be replaced with "we see Jesus." And in Jesus, we see God. And God is here when we have salt in ourselves and we bring peace.

Do we have salt in ourselves? When we see others do we only see our differences or what credentials they have, or if they are exactly like us? Instead of saying, "We saw someone," how about we see God? Do we see God in those working with us to bring peace? Do we see God in the persons who do deeds in Jesus' name? Do we see God in those casting out the demons in this city and in the world? We indeed must see someone. What we must see is salt in ourselves. We must see peace.

Amen.