

September 29: A Pure Heart

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." ³⁹But 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. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For 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 cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If your hand causes you to sin, 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. ⁴⁴And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁵And if your eye causes you to sin, 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, ⁴⁶where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁷"For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁴⁸Salt 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."

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

It was fairly late on a Saturday when Dave and I got home from a few days away. I went to the kitchen to perform our nightly ritual of making popcorn and that is when I shouted, "gross!" For some reason, tiny little ants decided to move into my spice cabinet when I was away. More than a few met their fate in my saltshaker. Littered between crystals of salt were little legs and bodies, some still moving. Instead of making popcorn, I spent the next hour wrangling ants. My contaminated salt went into the trash, along with any spices that looked suspect. That happened a couple of years ago, but I still examine the salt before I shake it on my popcorn or set it out for guests. I know that in some cultures, insects are a viable protein source. But I am not there yet. I want my salt to be pure, free of legs and antennae.

I suppose if you had enough body parts in the shaker, it might lose some of its saltiness, though I don't want to find out. Impurities are the only thing I can think of to make salt less salty to the point of being worthless. That's what I imagine when Jesus asks about salt losing its saltiness...its so contaminated its ceases to be of any value.

Jesus concludes by saying, "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

What do you make of that? What does salt have to do with the kingdom of God? How do we have salt in ourselves? Is Jesus searching for his lost shaker of salt?

Perhaps.

Salt was a valuable commodity in Jesus' day. In addition to seasoning, it was used as a preservative, for healing, and for offerings. Salt was also used for currency. In our reading for today Jesus taps into this wealth of imagery.

We know today that salt cannot lose its saltiness. But it can become so corrupt, polluted, and diluted that it loses all its beneficial qualities. The same is true for us. We cease to benefit the kingdom of God when we are contaminated by attitudes and behaviors that work against the common good.

And let's be clear here. The kingdom of God IS Jesus' mission; on earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom Jesus gave his life to inaugurate is a kingdom of peace and love, forgiveness and mercy, inclusion and equity, and compassion for the most vulnerable. He didn't set out to start a new religious sect. He didn't aspire to restore Israel's Davidic kingdom. He didn't die to save us from some eternal place of torment, but rather the hell we create when we refuse to live mindfully of our fellow humans. What he envisioned transcends national boundaries, along with every other boundary that divides us from another. This was Jesus' mission. This is the movement he started, and we are called to continue by whatever means and resources we have. Salty disciples preserve and enhance their communities.

Working backwards with our text, Jesus uses hyperbole, or extreme language to emphasize how serious he is. If something about you doesn't serve the kingdom, cut it off. Is it your hand? Is it your actions, your power, your strength, your fist...if doesn't preserve and enhance, cut it off, says Jesus. Is it your foot? Is it your motivation, your drive...if it doesn't preserve and enhance, cut it off. Is it your eye? Is it your outlook, your perspective, your worldview?¹ If it doesn't preserve and enhance, gouge it out.

By the way - the word translated "hell" in this passage is Gehenna and that was the name of the ever-burning landfill outside of Jerusalem. It is as if Jesus is saying, take whatever is not useful, whatever doesn't serve the kingdom, send it to the dump. Examine yourself, address the contaminants and impurities and put them where they belong. To add an exclamation point to Jesus' words, he quotes from the prophet Isaiah (66:24), "where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

Backing up a little further in our text for today: What do you know about millstones? One source I read said they were massive and powered by animals to grind grain, weighing 1600

¹ Brian McClaren listed suggested these in a sermon he preached for A Sermon Every Sunday on this text.

pounds or more. For Jesus this is a weighty matter. *“If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,”* it’s a millstone necklace.

This line reminds me of Sandra Bullock’s beauty pageant speech in Miss Congeniality. She eloquently shares what she has learned from participating in the pageant and considers the other contestants, friends. The crowd goes wild. Then her FBI-agent persona emerges and she says, “If anyone, anyone, tries to hurt one of my new friends, I would take them out. I would make them suffer so much that they’d wish they were never born. And if they ran, I would hunt them down.”

“If anyone, anyone,” says Jesus, “cause one of these little one’s who trust on me to sin...” The word that the NRSV translates as “sin” is interpreted differently in other translations. Stumble, fall, offend are a few of the options. Don’t be a stumbling block. Another says, “Whoever ensnares one of these little ones who trust me...”

Given that Jesus was holding a child in the previous passage it makes you wonder if he is talking about both literal children and innocent ones. It can mean anything from the sexual exploitation of children to breaking one’s spirit. We must honor their vulnerability and do no harm...no harm. And yet...in the United States...About one in four children experience abuse or neglect in their lifetime. Neglect is the most common type of abuse, affecting 74% of victims, followed by physical abuse at 17%, and sexual abuse at 11%.² 1600 pounds is a lot of weight, but nothing compared to a lifetime of hurt inflicted upon a child.

Children, and people who are vulnerable, need our protection and compassion. To be salty disciples, we must rid ourselves of the contaminating thoughts and desires that hurt children and shred the fabric of community with secrets and lies. It’s heavy and it should be.

Jesus isn’t done with us yet. We started our scripture reading with the disciples complaining about THAT guy over there, and Jesus quickly lets the disciples know that they are the one with the problem. We are the ones with the problem.

The man in question is casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Jesus’ disciples are concerned because he isn’t one of the disciples. He is an outsider, using Jesus’ name. The disciples try to stop him. They report all of this to Jesus and for a moment we wait for him to respond. Will he be angry at the man for using his name but not being one of his disciples? What would happen if anyone or everyone just went around doing good for others in the name of Jesus? Or in the spirit of Jesus? Or without mentioning Jesus?

The disciples seem to be concerned about “us” and “them.” They are concerned with who is in and who is out – who is right and who is wrong. They are concerned about the line between them and THAT guy. And that is the problem Jesus would rather address.

² <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/national-statistics-on-child-abuse/>

Jesus redefines the word “us” from being an exclusive group – to an “us” that is inclusive and broad. He says, “Don’t stop him.” “Whoever is not against us is for us.” They don’t have to be one of us to be doing God’s work...what matters is that people are serving a greater good – thinking beyond their own tribe – demonstrating compassion – lifting up their neighbor – providing the cup of water.

The kingdom of God transcends our tribalism and our “us” and “them” thinking. It’s a movement, not a club. It’s bigger than all of us, and we need allies to join us, not enemies to exclude. Jesus challenges the disciples to override their tribal instincts to see the bigger picture. It’s not about us or them – its about the kingdom Jesus teaches us to imagine. A kingdom of peace and inclusion...love and compassion....justice and mercy.

Our impulse toward tribalism is one of those contaminants that dilutes our saltiness as disciples. It is tearing us apart as a nation. Brian Klaas has an excellent TED talk on tribalism and political extremism. He says we are falling back into tribalism. The first step is dehumanizing a perceived enemy. Find someone to blame for your problems and struggles. Simplify complex problems into meaningless soundbites. Surround yourself with those who only believe as you believe and vote as you vote. Tribalism will destroy us.

Klaas asks, “How do we stop this march toward political tribalism?” He says we have to overcome our tribal instincts. Which is what Jesus is doing in this passage – inviting us to think bigger – toward a greater good – where we can all exist and thrive.

Have you checked your salt lately? What needs to be sifted out for you to be one who enhances and preserves with full strength?

“Have salt in yourselves,” says Jesus, “and be at peace with one another.”