

The Salt of Our Faith

September 26, 2021

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel reading this morning is a continuation of the Gospel last week. Jesus has turned toward Jerusalem, and the cross awaits Him. He has completed His teaching and healing ministry in Galilee. He is preparing for His ultimate mission on earth and He is preparing His disciples for their role as leaders of His church on earth.

Last week, Jesus was in a house in Capernaum. His disciples had been arguing among themselves about who is the greatest (Mark 9:30-37). You remember how that ended, right? It ended with Jesus taking a child into his arms and saying, ***“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”*** You may also remember that I said that a child is a symbol of vulnerability, powerlessness, and dependency. Jesus expects us to serve such people in His name. Jesus is still in the same house and it appears the child is still with them. Jesus wants to continue His instruction but He is interrupted by St. John. St. John (Like Joshua in our Old Testament reading) wants to complain, or you might even say tattle, on someone who has been exorcising demons in Jesus' name. John tells Jesus that he and the other disciples tried to stop him. Do you see the reason why? The person was casting out demons, a good thing, and he was doing so in the name of

Jesus, a good thing. So why did the disciples want to stop him? He wasn't one of them. Apparently, he wasn't called as the other disciples were called by Jesus. (Like Edad and Medad in the Old Testament reading.)

Now, you might remember that a little earlier Jesus' disciples had been successful in casting out demons after Jesus sent them into the countryside and they came back somewhat elated. But then, they were confronted with a demon in a boy and they had to defer to Jesus to cast out that demon. Maybe they still had bruised egos and were a little jealous of this person who was casting out demons. They were trying to stop a person from healing in the name of Jesus. Wouldn't you think that Jesus' disciples would have been happy to see this person healing others of demonic forces? Wouldn't you think they would invite this person to meet Jesus and maybe join with them? Instead, they were threatened and became exclusive. They were still putting themselves above another person and keeping Jesus to themselves. (They had not heard what Jesus taught them about being a humble servant.) In effect, they were saying we are the ones Jesus chose and you aren't - Butt out.

Jesus tells them that if someone is NOT against us, then they are for us. Clearly, in comparison to the Pharisees and scribes who had been hounding Jesus in His ministry, this person knew Jesus and had such faith in Him that he acted on Jesus' behalf to help others. Jesus said even if someone does such a simple act as offering a cup of water as an act of mercy in the name of Jesus, they will be rewarded. St. John and his fellow disciples had to learn to be humble and inclusive in ministry. How true that is in our church today.

Oftentimes well-meaning people become so entrenched in their service to God that they put up barriers to others. They see themselves as the only chosen ones and won't relinquish their status to anyone else. And, how dare anyone else even try to do their job. Doesn't that sound like the disciples in this reading? They saw themselves as Jesus' servants but they excluded others, and in so doing became masters and stumbling blocks to others.

My Uncle Marvin, God rest his soul, was like that in my old home church. We had a steeple with a bell in it. The bell was tolled at the beginning of church services and during the Lord's Prayer. Tolling the bell required pulling a long, thick rope attached to it in just the right manner. My Uncle Marvin fancied himself as the only one who could toll the bell properly. If some unsuspecting soul stepped up to toll the bell and didn't toll it as Uncle Marvin deemed it should be tolled, he chastised them and then demonstrated the only correct way to toll the bell. Not many first-timers ever tried to toll the bell again after his rebuke. I have seen that type of behavior in all the churches that I have served. One person or a small group sees themselves as the only ones who can do a particular task in the way they do it. No one else is capable or worthy. And then, ironically, they complain because no one will help them. Jesus said if someone is not against us, they are for us. He was telling us to be inclusive, NOT exclusive in serving in His name.

Then, Jesus addressed the opposite side. What if someone discouraged someone from having faith in Jesus? Using the same child from before, He explained that causing others, especially innocent children to sin, incurred the wrath of God. Jesus said a better alternative to that wrath would be

for a person to be executed by having a massive millstone tied around their neck and thrown into the sea. Jesus used the word for a huge milling stone that was so large it had to be turned by an animal. Jesus' disciples may have been familiar with this form of execution as the Romans had drowned some Jewish insurrectionists in Galilee and a group of Galileans had done the same to some supporters of Herod. For Jews, this was a terrible fate because being dragged to the bottom of the sea denied them a proper burial. What Jesus described was radical and extreme. Using this hyperbole, that is using an exaggeration to make a point, Jesus is teaching His disciples and us about how important and precious faith in Jesus is.

It reminds me of a story. Esmerelda was the church gossip and finger-shaker of her church. She kept sticking her nose into other people's lives. Most of the time other members of the church were too fearful of her gossip to stand up to her. She made a mistake, however, when she accused a newer member of the congregation named Rubio of being an alcoholic after she saw his minivan parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She emphatically told Rubio and several others that anyone seeing his car there would know what he was doing. Rubio was a man of few words and he stared at her for a long moment before he just turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny what she said. It appeared he would not return to the congregation. He said nothing in light of these accusations. Later that night Rubio quietly parked his minivan in front of Esmerelda's house, got out, and walked home. His minivan stayed there all night and was there in the morning. You can see the point on several levels.

After Jesus warned His disciples about causing others to be tempted, sin, and lose their faith, He turned the focus from looking at others to looking inward, to being self-reflective. It's as if He was saying to John and His other disciples, *"Don't you worry about that other guy. You worry about yourself."* He's asking them, and us, to look within. The greatest stumbling blocks are not outside us but within us: anger and revenge, the judgments we make of others, prejudice, our desire to get ahead and be number one, the need to be right, our unwillingness to listen, the assumption that we know more and better than another, living as if our way is the only and right way, pride, fear, being exclusionary, our busyness, lies, gossip, our desire for power and control. These, and a thousand other things like them, are what cause others, and us, to fall from grace. These are the things that pollute us.

Jesus used the radical hyperbole of self-mutilation to make us aware of our sinfulness. He implies that sin comes from the heart but is carried out by the parts of the body. It would be better to cut off the parts of the body which cause us to sin than to face the wrath of God in hell. If we eliminated the means to sin, we would be better off. If we cut off our hands, then, we would stop our sinful acts. If we cut off our foot, then, we stop the means to go to sinful places. If we pluck our eyes, then we end the means to look at sinful things. However, if you follow that reasoning, we would then have to eliminate our ear, our tongue, and our sex organs, all of which lead us to sin. And we would cease to exist because the place where sin originates is in our heart which then directs the members of our body through our brain. We would have to eliminate them too. If we followed this reasoning, our whole body would be

destroyed. Now, Jesus is not recommending physical surgery here. He is recommending spiritual surgery. But that leads to the same end. And the alternative to not doing what Jesus suggests is the eternal fires of hell. The word Jesus used for “hell” here is the word “gehenna” which the Greek form the Hebrew words “ge hinnon” or the “The Valley of Hinnon.” In Old Testament times, apostate Jews made human sacrifices in this valley to the pagan God Molech. When that practice was stopped by King Josiah, he converted the area into a city dump for the City of Jerusalem where the garbage and refuse of the city burned constantly. The burning fires at this place never went out. It reeked and worms lived there and fed on the garbage. It was truly a hellish place. The word “gehenna” or “hell” is only used twelve times in the New Testament and eleven of those times it is used by Jesus.

Jesus was teaching the terrible effect of sinning on humans. He was using hyperbole to explain the need for self-control and a pure life. He knew that His disciples had sinned with the arguments and posturing they had done on the road to Capernaum. He knew that we, just like them, are unable to control our sinful ways and we even lead others into sin. Because He knew all this, He loved them, and us, so much that He offered Himself for mutilation and death as the substitute for us. He allowed His hands and His feet and His heart to be pierced for our sins. He allowed himself to be cut off from God on the cross from which He shouted, ***“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”*** He was completely cut off from His Father for us. He died that we might continue to live spiritually. I don’t know if those disciples knew how Jesus would be the sacrifice for them at the time that He was teaching them,

but I am sure that they came to understand this after His death. They were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, just as you and I were in our baptism, and their eyes, and our eyes, are opened to Jesus' words and His deeds.

At the end of the reading today, Jesus tells His disciples everyone will be tested, be salted by fire. Salt and fire are both useful in preserving meat. Salt was thrown on the sacrifices by Old Testament priests as they were burned on the fire in the Temple in the Old Testament. Jesus is telling us that the salt of our faith will be tested. If our faith is strong and does not lose its salinity if our faith is not adulterated by this world and its values, we will serve God and our fellow man in this world. Our faith will see us through. If we lose sight of Jesus as the center of that faith, our saltiness will be lost and we will be of no use to Jesus or the world on His behalf.

Jesus told His disciples, and us, to have salt in ourselves. Jesus was calling on us to keep our faith in Him. He was calling on us to be at peace with one another. In doing so, we become the salt, the faith of the world, and serve Him as the messengers of His Gospel for their salvation. Without that peace among ourselves as His servants, we lose our salt. The test of our faith allows us to demonstrate our faith in God and our trust in our salvation through Jesus Christ. Our saltiness serves to speak to the world and keep us from it while at the same time being witnesses to our Savior.

Jesus does not want us to self-mutilate ourselves. Jesus does not want us to suffer for eternity in the agony of hell. He has suffered and died much more radically for us so we

do not have to. He does want us to join Him in Heaven. He does want us to keep our faith and faithfully serve Him as witnesses to all He has done and continues to do for us.

May your salt always be salty and may you always be at peace with each other, to the glory of the one who is Your Savior and Redeemer. Amen.