

Sermon Preached September 27, 2009
Year B, Proper 21
Mark 9:38-50
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Once upon a time, a king who had 3 daughters asked them how much they loved him. The first said she loved him more than all the gold in the world and he was pleased. The second, not wanting to be outdone, said she loved him more than all the precious gems in the world - and again he was pleased. The third and youngest who was always so loving and sweet said that she loved him more than all the salt in the world. He was outraged. What could be more common than salt. He was hurt and upset and stormed out. The youngest daughter, realizing how hurt her father was - went to the palace kitchens and ordered the chef to put no salt in the king's food until further notice. After 2 days without salt in his food, the king ordered the chef to come and see him - and he complained that for 2 days the food had been so insipid and tasteless. He demanded an explanation. The chef stammered an apology and bowed deeply and told the king of the instructions he had received from the king's daughter not to put salt in the food.

It was then the king realized the tremendous compliment his daughter had paid him. It was he who gave her life its flavor and meaning.¹

Jesus also speaks about salt in the Gospel today. But the reading opens with a typical concern of the disciples: someone else is getting their glory. If you remember last week the disciples were arguing among themselves who was the greatest. This week they are annoyed that someone else is casting out demons in Jesus' name, and it's not them! They want this guy to stop because they want the credit for themselves. Now it's easy for us to lambaste the poor disciples as being too self-absorbed, but the reality is they are pretty much like all of us. We are all a little bit anxious about our status. We all want to lift ourselves up in the eyes of others and hoard our little fiefdoms in fear that they might be taken from us. Who knew? The disciples wrestle with insecurities too!

- ¹ A folk tale as told by Rev Shirley - Edinburgh, Scotland. Sermon Nuggets at <http://home.roadrunner.com/~lyndale/Pentecost%2017B.htm>. Variations found throughout the world. <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/salt.html#meier>.

But instead of agreeing with the disciples, Jesus defends this outsider. In fact, he claims him as an insider. Any one who does the work of Jesus is part of Jesus' mission. "Whoever is not against us, is for us." Not only were they to let go their claims to uniqueness as Jesus' disciples, anyone can be a follower, but that Jesus' embrace is wider than they might have imagined. In fact, he says, whoever does something as simple as offer a cup of water is part of the Kingdom. The writer Ann Lamont once wrote, "You have created God in your own image when you are convinced that God hates all the same people you do." To be a follower of Jesus has nothing to do with drawing arbitrary boundaries as to who is in and who is out, instead it has everything to do with who is willing to serve.

This is also the second of three Sundays where Jesus talks about children. As we looked at last week, children have the lowliest status in the Ancient Near East. For Jesus to lift them up as ones deserving special attention underscores his vision of service to those in society who are the most vulnerable. To be a follower of Jesus is about service to not only children, but the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

In addition, the gospel of Mark is very concerned about evil. It is filled with stories of overcoming demons, Satan, and unclean spirits. It's no surprise that the opening lines of the story are about someone casting out demons in Jesus' name. Mark likes this kind of stuff. In fact, Jesus links the fighting of evil to the inclusiveness of being his follower. He says, "for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me." In other words, doing deeds of power to cast out demons or stand up against evil are actions that make one a follower of Christ.

So there are three messages that we get from Jesus in this passage so far. There's a lot going on here. The first message is that we are not to judge who is, or is not, a follower of Jesus. Probably more folks are disciples than we give them credit for, including people in other denominations. The second and third messages are that being a follower of Christ entails standing up against evil and serving others.

The final sentences have something to do with salt. Jesus says, "For everyone will be salted with fire. 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." Frankly, at first blush, these sentences are a little obscure. How can we have salt in ourselves?

I once read a book called *Salt* by Mark Kurlansky, which was a story of salt and how it was used and understood throughout the history of the world. It is actually a fascinating topic. Because salt is necessary for human life, it has been a prized possession for millennium. No town or society could grow in a land without access to salt. Salt was often used for trade and as a form of currency. It was a valuable commodity. Salt has curing and healing abilities. It is used as a disinfectant. I remember being told by my doctor when I had sore throat to gargle with salt water.

Biblically salt is used both in sacrifices and as a preservative. For instance in Leviticus it says, “You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt” [Leviticus 2:13]. Salt was also used to preserve food, and it was used to bind covenants between parties [II Chronicles 13:5]. At the same time salt was sometimes used in the Bible for images of barrenness and destruction [Judges 9:45].

What do we know about salt? We know that salt has a bigger impact than its size would indicate. A little goes a long way. It also brings out what is hidden. My grandmother was a great cook. For my 9th birthday she compiled an easy cookbook for me so that I could create simple recipes. Under the recipe for hot cocoa, she noted that it is important to add a pinch of salt to even sweet dishes to bring out their sweetness. To this day I always add a tiny bit of salt to cocoa or any sweet dish. It really works! Salt makes a difference that usually goes unnoticed. Also, salt has no value by itself. Each grain is small. It only works when together with other grains. It is common, yet vitally important. We use expressions like “rubbing salt in a wound”, “salt of the earth,” [Mt 5:13] and “take it with a grain of salt.”² We also use salt to guard against evil. How many of us, when we spill salt, throw a pinch of it over our left shoulder to hit the devil in the eye? And when I first moved into the rectory the Fundeklians gave me gifts of bread and salt: ancient Jewish and Christian symbols of hospitality, that I may never lack for the necessities of life.

- ² Sermon Nuggets at <http://home.roadrunner.com/~lyndale/Pentecost%2017B.htm>

So. What does all this have to do with Jesus' admonition to the disciples to have salt in themselves and not to lose their saltiness? We've learned that salt purifies, heals, preserves food, binds covenants, brings out what is hidden, only works in community, offers hospitality, and guards against evil. And like the king's third daughter illustrated, although salt is common – it's necessary for and gives flavor and meaning to life. Jesus has just encouraged his disciples to fight evil and serve others, followed by the command to be like salt. He is saying we, you and I, are to be salt to the world. We are to stand up against evil and serve others in love by doing as salt does: purify, heal, preserve what is good, work in community, extend hospitality, bring out what is hidden, and give flavor and meaning to life. At the same time, being inclusive of others who also do so. Our actions need not be dramatic, small works and prayers as common as salt are sufficient, but they can have a large impact. So next time you reach for the salt shaker, remember, as a disciple of Christ we are to be salt to the world. Amen.