

“Salty Christians”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Mark 9:38-50

I have to start out by asking you, in the pews and watching online, how do you react to Jesus' words in the gospel? I want you to call out from the pews or type into the Facebook comments. Let me repeat some of the more abrasive words that came out of Jesus' mouth, and after I read them, I'd like to hear what you think:

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, It would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, 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. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, 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, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

That's what Jesus said, according to Mark's gospel. So, Christians, what do you think about that?

I can tell you some of the initial feelings I had reading the text. First, I asked, "What is this pious judgment Jesus is throwing at us?" I wondered, "what happened to forgiveness and grace?" And "wow, Jesus, are you really bringing hell into this?" To those of you who try to argue with me that God in the Old Testament is one tough, demanding being who has too much fondness for fire and brimstone, and the God we see in the New Testament is all love and peace, I offer you the Jesus we see in *this* passage.

We were on our way apple picking yesterday, and our daughter brought up some light, road trip conversation for our drive. She said, "So, I know the news isn't covering Trump much these days. They've moved on to more important things like COVID. But, what's up with the Taliban? I haven't heard much about them lately. And what does Malala think about what's going on with them?"

Now, if Christians were to take Jesus' words literally, they would be kind of like the Taliban, who we know has a history of doing horrible things like cutting off the hands of a thief so he would not steal again.

Chris had volunteered to sub for teaching our daughter's Sunday School class today. She is generous with her scowls when I describe a gospel text that either doesn't make sense, or

sounds harmful, and so I dreaded to hear what her reaction to this text was. She said it sounds like something that would get used to bash LGBTQ people, to make them conform to being straight.

So, maybe we should do exactly what the gospel says, and cut out this piece that is so troubling-- especially if it causes people to stumble in the way of knowing Jesus.

But then again, in the past week, I have advised someone struggling with workplace procrastination based on her perfectionism to try to tackle the most dreaded, snarly work emails first, so she can get them out of the way. I told my daughter that she should zero in on the hardest measures of the violin piece she's trying to learn, rather than play the whole thing through each practice. Maybe if we do the same with the bible, we might get somewhere. Sometimes, the big, dreaded things get snarlier when you don't deal with them.

What we have from Jesus is some **salty** language; even at the end of the passage he talks about salt-- "salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves," Jesus tells his followers, "and be at peace with one another."

If you are talking about language or personality, we say someone is salty if they or their words are tough, aggressive, or spirited. You could use all these descriptions to talk about Jesus' language here in the gospel.

It's hard to describe or define what the actual **taste** of salt is. Briny is the only adjective I can think of, but even that's not perfect. It's almost easier to define the opposite of salt flavor: you could say bland, unseasoned, or sweet, or fresh-- as in fresh water, verses ocean water, or fresh fish versus salted fish.

It's funny, each summer when I take my first dip into the ocean-- that is, if I'm lucky enough to get to the shore-- I am surprisingly surprised at the sensory experience of being in salt water again. Intellectually, I know: ocean water is salty. But there is something that tricks the mind, looking at the water. It looks cool and refreshing, and there is some part of my brain that, I guess, forgets this is not fresh water, forgets *just how* salty the ocean is. So, when I get that first mouthful of saltwater after being knocked over by a wave, I become very alert. Salt water is different. It surprises the mouth. It stings the eyes. If you're in it long enough, it wrinkles your lips as they dry up in its wash. You can see and feel its impact on you.

I believe Jesus throws salty words at us in the gospel passage we read today because he wants us to be surprised and alert. He is telling us important things. So often we expect Jesus' words to be gentle, like fresh water. But like fresh water, which is usually calm, clear, and doesn't surprise us much, the gentle Jesus we too often prefer doesn't ask anything of us or challenge us. However, if we wade into salty water, we risk being tossed about; we risk having our senses filled; we may even come out a little disoriented.

Jesus' words are addressed after an incident that is similar to what happened in the Numbers passage. In the Numbers passage, while people-- who are probably pretty tired of eating the manna that God provided each morning-- are longing for the yummy foods they remember from the gardens they tended while enslaved in Egypt-- leeks, cucumbers, onions, garlic, melons... not to mention meat-- God tells Moses to call 70 elders from the assembly to gather in the tent of the meeting. Once they gathered, the Spirit rested upon them and they prophesied. However, 2 of the seventy hadn't come to the tent; instead, they were back at the camp, with everyone else. When Joshua and others who wanted to keep the orthodoxy alerted Moses, Moses asked, "What? Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would fill them with spirit!"

Similarly, in Jesus' time, John reported with concern that someone else-- who isn't among the disciples-- was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Was this a misuse of power? Would they lead people astray? Would the attention they get detract from Jesus' name? No. Jesus said, "Do not stop him. For whoever is not against us, is for us."

It seems like God, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus are together involved in opening things up whenever people are trying to tighten the circle of who may speak of God, who may do the ministry of Jesus, or who might receive the Spirit. Instead of excluding, Moses and Jesus are showing us that following God leads us to include.

Long ago, this church formed out of a witness to such holy inclusion. The church that came before us taught that only people who were baptized, confirmed members of that specific church may be allowed to take communion. After all, they rationalized, how else could the elders tell who was worthy and who was not? They understood Jesus' sacred meal to be only for the chosen. However, there were some who saw the spirit of welcome and inclusion in the gospels, and felt called to open the communion table, so that anyone who longed to eat and drink from Jesus' table would be welcomed. We don't get to rank people in worthiness. By the grace of Jesus, we are all made worthy. Who are we to throw up obstacles to their faith?

And, the gospel says, if we are the ones putting up obstacles for the "little ones" who believe in Jesus, it would be better if a millstone were tied around your neck and thrown into the sea. Remember from last week, this passage is a continuation of the speech Jesus gave when he took a young child into his arms, and told his listeners, "Whoever receives a child in my name receives me." So when Jesus was talking about the little ones, he was probably literally talking about little children. But at the same time, he was talking about those who were weak, at the margins, vulnerable. I'd like to note that in the next chapter of Mark, Jesus heals Bartimaeus, who was blind. Jesus noticed people like Bartimaeus, and honored the power within them. The Greek verb from the passage that gets translated as "little ones" is "*micron*"-- it's the same root we use for microscope, microwave, or microchip-- all tiny things, that have a huge impact. Think of how the microwave sends the most tiny currents of radiation, but its impact causes a searing heat. Like a mustard seed that grows into a huge plant, Jesus is pointing out how powerful and valuable those whom society treats as small are in God's eyes.

One thing about salt is that if it gets put onto an open wound, it really hurts. There are people who are wounded because they have endured pain and suffering from the judgmental and sometimes cruel nature of other Christians. Their condemning attitudes have kept many from wanting to know or follow Jesus Christ. It turns out that those who have tried to keep the pathways to Jesus pure or narrow have actually *been* the stumbling blocks that have kept people from Christ.

But salt has healing properties as well. It is a natural antiseptic. A salt bath can help improve circulation. It can soothe tired, sore muscles. Salt is also a preservative. And when swimming, if we are in salt-water, we can more easily stay afloat because the salt keeps us buoyant.

As much as we may crave sugar from a gentle Jesus, a dash of salt is exactly what the church needs sometimes. As we consider what obstacles the church puts up, or that we stumble upon on our own in the journey toward Jesus, it's helpful to think about how our bodies engage in helping others. Are our hands putting up "stop" signs, or are they holding a cup of water for someone else to drink? Are our lips speaking evil of others, or are they used to convey God's compassion and love? Are our eyes seeing the smallest ones? Or are they fixed upon what is big, powerful, and impressive? My former colleague in Chicago, Nanette Sawyer, says, "there is a wholeness that looks different from what we think. It's not having two working hands, two working feet, or two working eyes that bring us into the kingdom of God. It's better 'to enter life' with one foot, he says, than to stumble with two feet. It's what we do with what we have that matters."

I invite you now, to look at your hands. Consider the salt of your body: the tears, the sweat. Consider your feet, your eyes. Even the wounds, both open and scarred? How might these be an offering to God, to further the ongoing creation of God's community of justice and inclusion and love? Where are the hands of our church? The feet? The eyes? The wounds, tears, and the sweat of our church? How can we offer these too, in holy sacrifice, as Jesus did so long ago?