

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
Sunday, September 27, 2009

Salty...
©2009 Ray Bagnuolo

Readings:

First Reading: James 5:13-20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Reflection... "...*pray for one another, so that you may be healed.*"

Second Reading: Mark 9:38-50

John 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." But 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. 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.

"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.

"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."

It is a lake. It has one of the highest concentrations of salt of any body of water. It also has the lowest elevation on the Earth's surface of dry land (1385 feet below sea level). And, it is 1,240 ft deep, making it the deepest hypersaline lake in the world.

The Arabs called it al-Bahr El-Mayyit and the Jews referred to it as Yam Ha-Melah. We know it today as the Dead Sea. It is a closed basin, making it an endorheic type of lake, fed by the Jordan River. You can stand on one side of it in Israel and look across to Jordan.

The view is as stunning as the salinity is unmistakable.

Near the time of the gospels, it was a place of refuge for King David, one of the first health resorts for Herod the Great, and a provider of products used in fertilization (potash), mummification, and even fragrances.

It is not surprising that with the Dead Sea as its background and the uses of salt, especially for preservation and survival that its reference would be common in the language of the day and the teachings of Jesus. The gospel writers salt or saltiness some 48 times.

It is the saltiness that interests me this morning, and I think we can make some connections to the gospel readings and who we are – thinking of salt and its characteristics.

I'll start with something I heard President Obama say in one of his early speeches as POTUS, relating to something moving through the Senate. I think it was health care reform, but I might just think that because it is so much of what we have been hearing.

He said, "I have no pride of ownership" in the passage of whatever it is. However it is done is fine with me. That's a pretty lofty statement and reminds me of what one of the founders of The Coca-Cola Company, Ernest Woodruff was reported to have said in the early 1900's: "There's no limit to what you can accomplish, as long as you don't care who gets the credit."

In the best of leaders, there will always be ego – but there will always be leadership, as well. The kind that excites people from some deep place within and then energizes them in ways to act or behave for a common goal or a particular purpose. We remember things, I believe, based on what we need to hear. It doesn't even matter if, in the case of Obama or Woodruff, that they in fact really believed what they said. I hope they do, really, and their actions tell the story, but what is most important to me is that I heard, deeply inside, what they said. In a word, "It's not about me."

Mark starts out with the disciples asking Jesus whether they should "shut down a competitor," so to speak.

“ Hey, Jesus, there’s guys over in the next town running around healing people, preaching, making them feel better about themselves and their lives and eternity, and...AND they’re using your name! Your name! Let’s sue them. You know, copyright infringement, violation of licensing agreements. They’ve got to stop! We’re the ones who have the message. They’re going to mess it up. Imagine, strangers healing in your name. Oh, my God!”

I think Jesus would have spoken this as a rabbi, as a teacher, taking his time, maybe even being a little gentle – because there would be a sting to the ego here, a bit of salting to the open wound where pride would be removed:

“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. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.”

In a brief encounter in this pericope or short slice of the passage, Jesus removes any claim of the Twelve to the exclusivity of divine power. In other words, even those who are not disciples can do God’s work.

For us, that’s no surprise. We already knew that, but did we know that Jesus knew it? To keep the “salty” theme going, think of an exclusive club doing good works. Power concentrated in the hands of a limited number, with privileges, perks, authority, distant from challenge.

Then, think of Jesus, Son of God, arguably the most influential leader in all of the cosmos – even by those who don’t “know” him – saying, “Spread it around. This is for everyone.”

Well, if that exclusive club is a big porterhouse steak, rare – this command to be welcoming to all who might do things in the name of Jesus – is “some spicy sauce!”

Talk about changing the rules...

And we practice that here, in the way of our theology and praxis. We see everyone in our worshipping community and the broader community that we welcome as “ministers.” Do you ever wonder why I don’t wear a robe – or anyone here doesn’t wear a robe? It’s so that we don’t draw lines between who we all are – ministers, all the people, ministers – to one another and those we meet—even if it is in just giving someone a cup of water because in your heart you know Jesus and his teachings and you know what to do – no words needed. That simple.

Talks about spicing things up, big time.

When we read Mark this morning, we are reading a collection of sayings combined in ways to make it clear, however, what the risks are of being inauthentic disciples, into it all for self-gain, taking advantage of others. Seeking power over the powerless... here referred to “as the little ones...” and those weak in faith who can be persuaded easily by false promises...think of the TV evangelist I spoke of a while ago...

Mark uses the word words “fall away,” which in Greek is **skontafto** – the root of the word “scandal.” So, he is saying, basically, that to impose oneself on others in a way that uses the gospels and teachings of Jesus for self gain is: *scandalous*. So scandalous, in fact, that it would be better to lose a limb than to lose the opportunity to enter the kingdom of God.

That’s pretty strong language, and it would not have been lost on those listening. And, it is unfortunate that, for some, this is taken literally – to the degree that one might ever think of self-mutilation as a solution to any problem or scandal. And when used to deliver messages that suggest this is what the Lord calls you to do...well, those doing such preaching and teaching...those are the ones that have fallen away, have lost their salt, their preservative power in the kingdom of God, and their place in the radical hospitality of Jesus and those who reach out in his name is missing or lost.

Folk who bring people to such places through hatred, viciousness, stupidity, rigidity, and sel-seeking power, bickering about place and accolades...they have lost their effectiveness to be disciples in this world.

Rather, those who have salt in themselves, as Mark tells us Jesus says, those can live in peace for they are on the path.

And so, let’s return to James for a minute...

James asks,

Are any of you suffering, cheerful, sick, needing forgiveness, healing, and more? Then you should pray. Call upon the elders and members of the church and sing praise and pray. For any of us who are of this work and helps another to return from the wandering of the sinner’s soul...from that place of distance from God...then you can be sure that such practice will cover a multitude of sins.

Be salty. Be effective in helping others in the name of Jesus and of God, as we may know God. Be unconditional in our care for one another. Acknowledge our shortcoming, talk to others, ask for forgiveness when needed. Don’t use others for gain. Don’t mislead “the little ones...” and don’t sweat the small stuff, don’t give up your saltiness...for if you do such things - it takes care of our own mistakes.

It is a powerful image for me that eternal life springs from a sea that is perceptibly dead because of its high salinity. In this world of ours, where there is so much life, there is a sea whose currents are scandalous. We stand alongside an abundance of divine power to be shared that is more concentrated than even the Sea of Salt.

Let us watch our sodium intake, but be generous with the salt we have been given to spice up this life for the kingdom of God and the great feast that is here, already at hand. Let us always remember the other and do what we need to do, in prayer and community, to be the healers and the witness – in deed and in word – from the depths beyond what we can measure.

From the very saltiness of our souls!

Amen.