

Pentecost 18 / September 26, 2021

Mark 9:38-50

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

Are you a busy person? Do you have several things on the go at the same time? This gospel reading is a busy text, there are so many things happening that its hard to find the centre. Jesus tells the disciples not to prevent someone who is not part of their group from casting out demons in His name. He says, *“The one who is not against us is for us.”* God’s kingdom is larger than the twelve. Then referring back to the child whom He previously blessed, He said, *“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”* Then He warns against temptation, saying that it is better to enter eternal life without a body part than to be thrown whole into hell. He reminds them that each of them and all of us, will be salted with suffering and be seasoned with tribulation for Him and for the gospel. Finally, returning to their argument as to which of them was the greatest, He urges them and us to have the salt of the gospel in our selves and *“be at peace with one another.”*

Many biblical scholars think that Mark simply put several of Jesus’ sayings together, because he knew they were important, but lacked the space or papyrus, to give them their proper context. Mark is a busy gospel. It provides the briefest and quickest synopsis of Jesus’ ministry. None of the evangelists give a continuous narration of Jesus’ words. In concluding his gospel John said, *“Jesus did many other things not written in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God that believing you may have life in His name.”* The gospel writers, moved by the Holy Spirit, selected sayings, teachings and discourses of Jesus which they felt would most effectively show Him the Saviour, so that we might put our faith in Him and follow Him as Lord.

Mark may have condensed some of Jesus’ discourse to the disciples, but neither did he make a Friday soup out of the weeks left overs. Three things in Jesus’ words stand out. The seriousness of sin, which leads to eternal suffering and death. The danger of leading others into sin. That temptation to sin comes from inside of us, as well as from outside influences. Jesus’ words show that the most important things are: receiving Him as Saviour, following Him as Lord and honouring Him with our words and with our actions among all people and especially in our relationships with each other as believers; members of His body on earth. He sums it all up succinctly, saying, *“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.”*

The gospel began with Jesus asking the disciples what they had been talking about as they walked home to Capernaum, knowing full well they had argued as to which of them was the greatest. They replied with shamefaced silence! Jesus said, *“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”* To dispel their notion of greatness, He took a humble child and said, *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.”* Have you ever been caught red handed doing or saying something you shouldn’t have? Have you ever been in an awkward situation? I bet you could have cut the silence with a knife. Perhaps to clear the air and to deflect from the situation, John mentioned how they had seen someone not from their group casting out demons in Jesus’ name and that they had stopped him. Surely there were some brownie points in that!

Wrong! Jesus said they should not stop him. Only the demons would benefit from that. He said, just because someone isn’t part of our group doesn’t mean they aren’t on our side. Not only were the disciples not to seek individual greatness, they were not to think of their group as exclusively possessing the keys to the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom belongs to God and He opens it to everyone who has faith in Jesus’ name. Something all churches and believers should keep in mind! The disciples had a problem. That problem was their sin. Sin is also our problem. They would be salted with fire from the outside in terms of persecution and suffering for the sake of the gospel, but the greatest danger comes from within, from our own sinful nature, which they seemed to have forgotten. They were close to Jesus, so how could they have any sin? Sometimes the closer we feel we are to Jesus the more grievously we sin!

A case in point was the disciples’ attitudes towards and treatment of children. The disciples didn’t mistreat children in the way we commonly think today. They didn’t cause them physical or emotional harm, but they certainly would have caused them spiritual harm, if they had succeeded in their attempts to keep them away from Jesus. When mothers brought their little children for Jesus to bless, the disciples tried to stop them; even as they stopped the stranger from casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Jesus stopped them and said, *“Let the little children come to me and do not prevent them for to such as these belongs the kingdom of God.”* The disciples did not think they were doing anything wrong in either of those situations. Sin is so deceptive that we can even keep people

from Jesus and think we are doing God's work. Jesus wants us to be aware of our sin, so that we turn to Him in faith for forgiveness and follow under the direction of His word and Spirit.

Sin is so serious and the consequences so terrible that Jesus says it would be better for a person to maim her or himself and enter eternal life lacking an eye or hand, or foot than to be thrown whole into hell. He said, "*If your hand causes you to sin cut it off...If your foot causes you to sin cut it off...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 with two eyes to be thrown into hell.*" I can safely say that throughout Christian history, almost everyone has chosen to take Jesus' words figuratively rather than literally. As one commentator said, 'otherwise churches would be filled with people with one eye, one hand and one foot. But even if we took Jesus' words literally and cut off the parts of our bodies that cause us to sin, that still wouldn't cut the sin from our hearts. Jesus said, "*Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.*" The Apostle Paul fasted, prayed and did other things to subdue his flesh, lest after preaching to others he should fall into grievous sin and be disqualified from the kingdom. Nevertheless, sin remained in his flesh as a constant reminder of his need for Jesus his Saviour.

Jesus may not have intended His words to be taken literally in the physical sense, but He certainly wants us to take them literally in the spiritual sense. Sin is a serious thing. Its eternal consequences are much worse than any physical disability in time. That sulphur bath doesn't seem appealing to me. Yet that wouldn't be the worst of it. The worst of it would be being without God and without hope for eternity. Hell is often portrayed in physical terms, because we are more in touch with our bodies than with our spirits. Our stomachs growl, its time to eat. Our spirits hunger for the living bread of the word, the refreshment of baptism and the nourishment of the Lord's Supper and it might take a long time for us to notice. God created us to live in relationship with Him. The worst suffering comes from being apart from Him. The greatest suffering is to be without Him for eternity, especially for those who have tasted the goodness of the Lord.

We should take Jesus' words literally; root out and cut off, not our body parts, but the sin that dwells within us. We do this by salting ourselves with God's holy word by which faith is created, nurtured and given growth. We do this by looking at ourselves in the mirror of God's holy law, by which our sins and sinfulness are revealed, so we see our need for the grace of forgiveness in Jesus' blood and righteousness. We root out and cut off the sin that dwells within us, by seeking the help of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us by virtue of our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit daily seeks to return us to the promise of our baptism, so that what is sinful may be drowned in repentance and sin may be washed away in forgiveness. We root out what is sinful within us by living together in community, bearing one another's burdens, correcting each other in love, forgiving as we have been forgiven, having good salt within ourselves and living together in peace!

Jesus said, "*Everyone will be salted with fire.*" Trouble comes to everyone in this world of sin, sorrow and death. Trouble comes to believers through our sinful nature and from the world around us; both of which lead us into sin. We have a sinful nature that rises anew each morning and which needs to be drowned daily in the water of our baptism through repentance and the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Yet this salting of our faith through fire also serves God's good purpose; deepening our trust in Him and drawing us closer to the heart of His love in Christ Jesus.

Jesus said, "*Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.*" In contrast to the salt of trial and testing, this is the salt of the gospel, by which we live in peace with God through Christ Jesus. The gospel is the salt by which our faith is seasoned, our spirits refreshed and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve one another in love, as children of the same heavenly Father; living together in peace, loving each other deeply from the heart of God's love in Christ our Saviour. God salt us always with the gospel of His love in Christ, until everything sinful in us is removed in the resurrection of Jesus and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, the home of His righteousness. In Jesus' Name. Amen