

Pastor Roy's sermon from September 30, 2012

Readings: Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29, Ps. 19:7-14, James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

Children's lesson: Salt

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

This past week I heard a news story that Donald Trump was speaking at the school Jerry Falwell founded, Liberty University for a fall convocation and he discouraged the students from turning the other cheek. In fact, he told them to go ahead and get revenge. Now, perhaps his context would help us understand why he might say such a thing, but it does sound like something he would say. I hear the audience was quiet after he said that. Perhaps they were thinking about what he said. Perhaps they rejected his foolishness to question Jesus' teaching, though perhaps it was only a rhetorical stunt.

But even if we do not practice the cut throat tactics of Trump to get ahead at the expense of others, at times, are we not quietly envious of the power and wealth of those who do? Are we not also tempted to place things and ambitions above the relationships which alone will bring joy and peace? Relationships with family, friends, and God. Jesus also invites us to notice and accept those who offer us something as simple as a cool cup of water. Curiously in this passage he is not calling us to offer water, but to receive such gifts with gratitude and count the giver blessed by God. Whoever is not against us, is for us. All are friends.

In this invitation to unity, Jesus is questioning our tidy ways of determining who is good and who is bad, who is acceptable, and who is unacceptable—these all fall flat when it comes to the reign of God. Everyone is potentially a partner in the kingdom. Remember the Good Samaritan? Jesus didn't tell us that parable to make us be nice to people, but to remind us that our judgments are a poor predictor of who will do good and who will do nothing. We falsely and easily judge others to be enemies when they are actually friends with similar goals.

We worry about many things. Jesus calls us to be instead concerned about causing others to stumble. If someone despairs of life because of me. Woe to me. If someone gives up on God because of me, Woe to me. If someone despairs of ever trusting in the possibility of grace and peace in this world because of us and our resources, weapons, and power which we use to further our concerns in this supposedly Christian country, woe to us. We are judged not based on who we accept and embrace, as so many assume, but we are judged by who we ignore. Whoever is not against us, is for us and with us.

Mark reveals Jesus saying that those who cause others to despair will themselves know despair. If we spread despair, we will live despair. In other words, those who spread hell already live in hell. Hell is less external punishment, and more the sad result of living in fear and self-centeredness. We by our actions and thoughts create heaven and hell everywhere we go. We create hell when we give authority to our own fears rather than exploring God's goodness already at work in our world. But Jesus' comments do not end here. What might Jesus mean, "For everyone will be salted with fire?" and "Salt is good?"

Perhaps it means that the pain of our own hells will bring us around to the truth of God's grace. For everyone will be salted with fire." Could the fire bring us to God's grace? Could our own hells bring us around to a fuller experience of God and faithfulness?

Early in life, we all fail because we all experience trouble. The good news is that the assault with fire can turn out for our own good. Salt is good because it makes us thirsty for grace, for God's goodness.

Is your head spinning yet? Read this passage through a couple times quickly, and your head will spin. This is poetry! Salt, fire, hell, a cup of water, millstones, little ones, and peace. Jesus is calling us to sit with the confusion of life and consider the grace working in it all.

Everyone is salted with fire, the fire of life's painful realities, some of which we have brought on ourselves, some of which we have innocently stumbled upon, perhaps even as we struggle to be faithful.

Finally, how do we "Have salt in ourselves, and be at peace with one another?"

Could Mark be telling us to find grace in Jesus' teachings and faithful invitation to live the cross life? To allow the assault of life's fiery pain to draw us back to God's grace? What other choice do we have? We can keep trying to get it right, but that simply is never going to happen. How slow are we to realize this? We keep trying to get it right, to prove ourselves...and we keep getting assaulted by fire.

If we have an ounce of wisdom, we keep coming back to God. How? Seek God's grace within. Let go of fears and ego's never ending demands of self-righteousness, goodness, and competence so that we may embrace God's mercy. Each morning. Each day. Each moment of our lives. How many times can I forget God's mercy? No problem, along comes another fiery trial, another mistake, another error in judgment which forces me own up to my need and God's provision of grace! Life provides all we need to grow in grace. Fear not!

Salt is good. Even if we seem to have lost our saltiness, we can be seasoned with God's goodness and grace. Let us be still long enough to turn from our own hell to God's heaven of goodness and kindness which never disappoints. Follow the true longing of your heart which is the Holy Spirit. The mercy we seek is the mercy we give to our enemy and our neighbor, to our sister and brother. These mercies are inseparable. Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. Amen.