

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 21  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
September 26, 2021  
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29  
Psalm 19:7-14  
James 5:13-20  
Mark 9:38-50

## Let's Be Salty

*They're a little salty. She's a little salty about that. He's kinda salty these days.* Have you heard these kinds of locutions lately?

Only in the last few years have I heard *salty* used to indicate that someone is irritated, angry, or bitter.

Contrast those with some other older uses of *salty*: a salty sailor or an old salt, for example, indicating someone with a great deal of experience, on the water, or in some other endeavor.

Salt has played key roles throughout human history, so it's no wonder that Jesus uses it as a metaphor to give expression to qualities his followers should have.

In today's gospel he tells the disciples of the first century and us to "have salt in [ourselves] and be at peace with one another."

It's among the more comprehensible instructions in this passage from Mark chapter 9 which is filled with references to demons, deeds of power, cups of cold water, millstones, and lots of hyperbole.

Our passage begins with Jesus telling the disciples not to worry if others also perform works of power in his name, saying that whoever is not against us is for us.

This is an extension of a theme we heard in the first reading from Numbers where, after throwing a big fit about having to do everything himself, Moses is relieved when God leads him to appoint seventy elders to shoulder some of the work of leading the people of Israel in their wilderness wanderings.

After sharing the work, Moses is also content to share some of the responsibility and credit. When Joshua suggests Moses should shut down the work of a couple of guys not among that group of seventy newly appointed elders, Moses waves him off. *We can use all the help we can get*, is his response.

In the readings from both Numbers and Mark today the message is that anyone who isn't opposing the work of God given to us is in a certain way helping to further it. And anyone who is actively doing the work given to us is welcome to join in.

And the reading from James extends this even further by describing particular acts of loving service we, as followers of Jesus, can offer to others. These include intercessory prayer; laying on of hands and anointing with oil for healing; listening to one another's stories of errors and struggles as a path toward healing and wholeness; reminding one another of God's love and truth in times of trial and confusion.

We have entrusted to us—all of us—a powerful and wonderful ministry of reconciliation and restoration. As the passage from Mark states, even the smallest deed of kindness or solidarity, the offering of a cup of cold water in the name of Christ, is valuable and part of the bigger picture.

The passage from Mark next turns to millstones. Specifically, that we should take care not to cause others to stumble, especially little ones, those just getting going on the path of discipleship. We should assist them not hinder them. And, indeed, we will promise to do that very thing in a few moments as we baptize baby Charlee. We will promise to do all in our power to encourage her growth in Christ.

Next in our gospel we encounter some of the strongest and strangest and most confusing hyperbole of Jesus' recorded teaching. This is certainly one of those times to bear in mind that scripture invites the work of our imaginations and metaphorical thinking. Is Jesus really advocating bodily mutilation? That we should cut off our hands or feet or pluck out our eyes? No.

This hyperbolic, exaggerated language rivets our attention and makes us uncomfortable. This is the point of it. The meaning is that we should consider carefully the things that hinder us from becoming the people God desires for us to be. And, if we are serious about living into the fullness of God's life for us, we should be willing to give up anything—even something we prize as highly as our hands or feet or eyes—if it leads us to settle for less than that fullness.

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And then at last we come to salt. Salt in the biblical sense. Salt in the understanding of the ancient Mediterranean world, the first century.

“Everyone will be salted with fire,” Jesus says. This is an allusion to the sacrificial system of the temple in Jerusalem. Before being burned on the altar, the flesh of sacrificial animals was salted down.

“Everyone will be salted with fire” sounds very different to our ears, doesn't it? One way to translate it for ourselves in our time is, “Everyone should offer up the living of their life as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God.”

Next Jesus says, “Salt is good.” First century people knew this very well. Salt was valuable; Roman soldiers were paid with it. It's where our English word *salary* comes from. And it's where we get the phrase indicating someone is “worth their salt” or deserving of payment or credit.

“Salt is good.” It was connected with healing. It helps heal afflictions of the skin. It was applied to infections and wounds.

“Salt is good.” It's a natural preservative. Before refrigeration, it was one of the surest ways to preserve meat and fish. Just think of salty country ham.

“Salt is good.” It adds flavor. It brings out the flavor of other foods. It is additive.

“Salt is good.” It was understood as an image for wisdom, similar to our use of “salty sailor,” somebody who knows what they're doing and what they're talking about.

“Salt is good.” It was connected with worship as I've mentioned. Leviticus instructs that salt should be added to all the temple offerings. Salt is also connected with covenant. 2 Chronicles names the covenant between God and King David and all his descendants as “a covenant of salt”: a covenant that is imperishable and irrevocable.

“Salt is good.” It is connected with things which are considered sacred across many cultures and many historical eras. Pliny the Elder and Virgil, two important Roman authors, reference salt as necessary for making something sacred (*Nulla sacra conficiuntur sine mola salsa* [“Sacred things are not made without salted meal.]). And still today in Japan, sumo wrestling, a sacred sport connected to various traditions of Shinto, involves a purification ritual of a sprinkling of salt by the wrestlers before beginning a match and the outlining of the wrestling ring with salt.

“Salt is good.” Salt was understood as good in all these ways by Jesus’ original hearers. If salt loses its saltiness, you can’t put it back in.

So, when Jesus says, “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another,” he is instructing and inviting his followers, including us, to add value, to make valuable contributions, to be agents of healing, to preserve what is worth preserving, to add flavor, to be wise, to worship, to recognize the sacred, to offer ourselves up as a living sacrifice in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Let’s commit ourselves to following this teaching and accepting this invitation, especially as we reaffirm our own baptismal promises in a few moments and promise to support Charlee in her growth in Christ.

Y’all, let’s be salty.