

Salt and Solace
Mark 9:38-50
September 30, 2018
Leslie A. Klingensmith

In the early 2000s, President George W. Bush said, during the war on terrorism that other countries were “either with us or against us.” That was an emotional time, and I think I understand the context in which our President made such a statement. It was harsher than I would have liked, and it left no room for any gray area – but again, we were all reeling from a national psychic wound and in that moment, President Bush was speaking the truth of what he believed about confronting forces of violence. Maybe that is what needed to be said at that time.

However, when we are looking at the bigger picture and contemplating questions that span centuries, we need to consider a more expansive, nuanced approach to our relationship with those who think differently from us. Jesus calls us to this inclusive outlook in the gospel of Mark. John says to him “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” Interestingly, this situation – a person casting out demons in Jesus’ name but who does not follow the twelve – shows up in the other gospels as well, and Jesus’ response is the same each time. In other scenarios he appears to take the hard line echoed by President Bush so many years later – if you aren’t with me you are against me – but these did not have to do with someone offering help to another person in Jesus’ name. We have to understand that each of these statements addressed a particular situation. It was different circumstances that called forth these different responses.

Today’s scenario adds yet another layer. Jesus says “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.” In other words, people who choose to serve Christ will have their disagreements, but we can come together around our love for Jesus and our desire to serve God’s children. We can all

contribute to building up the reign of Christ in our world without having to give up the parts of ourselves that make us who we are. Note that the people in question here were followers of Jesus – John’s objection was rooted in the fact that they were not with the disciples.

What follows is an unflinching description of what people can expect when their behavior dissuades new followers of Christ, causing them to turn away. Whether you believe in hell as a literal place or not, it’s clear that those whose words or actions distract from love, from the love God has shown us in Christ – earn God’s displeasure. Indeed, these words are far more severe than what Jesus has to say about so many other sins. If we are to truly call ourselves followers of Jesus, we have an imperative to live in such a way that other people do not look at us and think “if this is how Christians behave, I don’t want any part of it.”

Perhaps you have heard that expression that someone is “the salt of the earth.” I heard it often as I was growing up in Oklahoma, and I use it myself, but I don’t think the idiom is limited to the southwestern or Midwestern parts of the country. I hear it here in the Mid-Atlantic states too. Salt is part of our collective consciousness. A quick internet search turns up literally dozens of songs, of all genres, with “salt” in the title. Salt in your tears. Salt in my wounds. A grain of salt. And, yes, salt of the earth.

I like to cook, as some of you know, and I often notice the importance of salt in recipes. Even dishes that are fundamentally sweet – like a pie or a cake – almost always call for at least a little bit of salt. Even if you cannot specifically taste it, salt adds something important to almost any recipe, whether it is a stew or a casserole or a pudding. At the same time, though, too much salt is NOT a good thing. People with high blood pressure have to be careful about their salt intake. Also, salt’s taste can easily overpower. One Thanksgiving I made a pumpkin pie and the recipe called for an amount of salt that was tiny in proportion to the other ingredients – I think it

was a teaspoon. But I misread the instructions and put a *tablespoon* in. We were celebrating the holiday at my sister's house in North Carolina that year with extended family and friends. I still remember how awful that pie tasted and how the guests were trying so hard to be polite and saying how delicious it was.

But still, overall salt is a good thing to have in your kitchen, and “salty” people are good to have in your life. To say that someone is “the salt of the earth” is a high compliment. It means that they are just a fundamentally good person – hardworking, honest, and kind. Maybe you didn't know that the phrase actually comes from the Bible, and that there are many references to salt throughout scripture. “Salt of the earth” actually comes from Matthew, it's part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says in Matthew 5:13 “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can saltiness be restored?” In other words, if we lose the thing that is distinctive about us, how do we reclaim it? Who are we?

Here in Mark, though, there is an added layer of meaning in the salt metaphor. Jesus refers to his followers being “salted with fire.” This is an obscure reference for us but would have been obvious at the time. According to the *Interpretation* commentary on Mark, Jesus is tying in the “fire” of burnt sacrifices with following him. The fires of sacrifice that were common in temple practice burned, but they also purified. Jesus is preparing to make the ultimate sacrifice in giving his own life so that we might come to understand the depth of God's love for us. It is our willingness to put our own lives on the line for what we believe to be right that potentially adds “fire” to our “salt.” Jesus' words are drawing forth the truth that a life of discipleship is not without risk. And, if we lose our “salt,” we lose our courage, our ability to live toward the vision that God has for the world.

When Jesus says “have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another,” he is

essentially saying that we should honor and nurture who we are and what we believe, trusting that God has given us the tools we need to be effective witnesses of his truth in the world. BUT, we also must recognize that God is doing the same thing in other people as well. We can appreciate their worldview and the good that they do in our world, we can even find common ground and work together in the world on so many things that make a positive difference in the lives of other people. We can do all of that without giving up what makes us distinctive, what makes us a salty presence in the world.

I must say that I found this notion of salt to be of solace to me in the past several days, and I hope it can be for you too. A small amount of salt changes the character of a dish, adding depth, making it more savory, providing essential nourishment. Likewise, my prayer has been that the salt of forbearance, of kindness, and of integrity can restore our nation to its best self.

You would have to be sleeping in a cave like some kind of Rip van Winkle to not know what I'm talking about. Our nation is increasingly polarized. The current presenting issue is over the future of the Supreme Court. That is important, and I am very concerned about it. I am also concerned about the prevalence of sexual violence against women and a culture that punishes women for demanding justice when they have been violated. These are all things that we should be paying attention to. But even when this situation is resolved, one way or another, we'll move on to something else. Fighting mode has become the de facto way of interacting in public life.

Here's the thing, though – we can be paying attention, and concerned, and still have different opinions on what is a faithful response to all that is going on around us. What really worries me is that we cannot even agree on a fair process for searching out truth. We are increasingly locking ourselves away in divided, fortified camps, refusing to listen to each other

or trust the other's intentions and motivations. We say to each other "you are either with us or against us" and we make little effort to find the places where we can come together. I'm guilty of this too. In my frustration and despair, I say things (often only to myself) that I don't really mean, or that I don't in my heart of hearts believe to be true.

But I do still have faith – in God, and in the people of God. Don't get me wrong – there are people out there who do and say things in the name of their God that I find abhorrent. But I have to leave sorting that mess out up to God, it's way beyond my skill set. I have faith in the subtle influence of salt in the world – the salt of listening, of thoughtful, measured responses, of kindness but also firmness. I want to be clear that I am not advocating for some kind of wimpy, anything goes outlook. We have to be clear in our convictions, and committed to them. And yet we can also keep sending the message that the way things are right now is not the way they have to be. Some of our leaders would have us believe otherwise – and make no mistake, there are leaders of the empire who benefit from having all of us fighting among ourselves. But we do not have to buy into that. We can have salt in ourselves, and still be at peace with one another. And that is where we find our solace.

I pray for our country. I pray for our leaders. I pray for women who have been assaulted and not believed, and for men who do such things. I pray. Amen.