

Mark 9:42-50 "Maintaining the Salt" Rev. Janet Chapman 9/26/21

One of my first jobs in high school was working for a Perkins restaurant, sort of like a Denny's, in Wichita, Ks. My primary responsibility was greeting and seating people which I enjoyed. My least favorite part of the job, I still remember to this day, was filling salt and pepper shakers. At that time, Perkins seemed to think it somehow classy to offer the most petite salt shakers for each table in order to give more room for people's food and elbows and multiple drinks, etc. So I never seemed to catch up – those people were always draining the salt, a practice which probably contributed to the massive heart problems of the 80's-90's across our nation. Just when I would get one section done, a waitress would call me over to do another section and it would start all over again. We are a people who love our food to be flavorful and therefore salt has become a staple, not always to our well-being.

Our scripture this morning concludes with the phrase, "Everyone will be salted with fire, (making salt like a purifier and cleanser as well as a seasoning). Salt is good; but if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? Maintain salt among yourselves, (also translated as) 'Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.'" Maintain the salt, have salt in yourselves. To a 15 year old hostess, it sounds like a never-ending job to be dreaded, but to the people of the first century, there was much more to it. Culturally speaking, the impoverished households of Jesus' time understood salt to have preservative, medicinal, and seasoning properties. It was part of the Roman economy as the salaries of Roman soldiers could be paid in salt rations. However, the problem was that for the poor, the only salt they could obtain contained bitter minerals improperly separated from sodium chloride, what we deem to be table salt. Whereas accessing the good variety of salt was often inconceivable for the poor, Jesus infers that they can become as salt themselves, taking on the properties that made salt such a valuable resource to begin with. Using a metaphor, Jesus says, "Have salt in yourselves." In encouraging this, Jesus is returning to the more difficult teachings of self-discipline we heard Lesley read earlier about cutting away anything that hinders life in God's reign.

Those earlier verses are considered some of the most difficult, even gruesome texts of Jesus' teaching. They do not show up on many people's list of favorite Bible passages. They are the makings of horror movies and nightmares for nowhere in all Jesus' teachings is he so

graphic about the wages of sin. We recoil from these texts because they attack our physical reality – cut off our precious hands and feet, gouge out our eyes? Better you should hang a rock around your neck and jump into the ocean, he says, better you should maim and blind yourself than walk around like nothing is wrong in your world, until the disaster siren sounds, the app on your phone says, “evacuate earth immediately” and you find yourself assigned to hell, where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. I don’t know how many of you have the sheriff’s emergency alert app on your phone, but last Thursday was very surreal as that app kept going off for some of us. With each alarming beep, often heard in stereo across stores and restaurants, you stopped breathing and braced yourself for the worst. The good news about these texts is that everyone seems to agree that unlike the alert warnings on your phone, these are not to be taken literally. You can walk into any Bible-believing fundamentalist church, where the women don’t wear pants or speak in church, where men don’t swear or mow their lawns on Sundays, and you won’t find many people with eye patches and wrapped stumps, because even the most literal Christians balk at this passage. It goes against their reason, not to mention their sense of self-preservation. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, “They become biblical critics just like the rest of us, which doesn’t mean we criticize the Bible but that we ask important questions of it. Whom is Jesus talking to and what is his purpose? Is he speaking literally or figuratively? Has Mark taken liberties in writing things down?”

Chronologically speaking, these are Jesus’ last words in his homeland. When he is finished, he will travel south from Galilee into Judea, where death awaits him in Jerusalem. This speech is akin to some kind of leadership seminar which begins with Jesus taking a little child on his lap (we heard a little bit about that last week). Jesus is telling his followers what is good for them and what isn’t. “It would be better for you...” he says four separate times, describing several awful things that would be better for them, than to cause a little one to stumble or to stumble themselves. Jesus is trying to impress on them the importance of their actions. There is a spiritual reality which is far more solid than the physical reality we are so careful about. Following Jesus’ ways is no casual affair, it is a life-or-death decision that is about to get very dangerous for everyone involved – not only because of what other people may do to them, but because of what they may do to themselves by failing to take themselves

seriously enough. Therefore, “Maintain salt among yourselves and keep peace with one another.” Everything you do has consequences. Everything you say counts. You are either part of the good news or you are a part of the bad news, but one thing is certain - you are not invisible or insignificant.

In the beloved tale “A Christmas Carol,” Charles Dickens tells the story of how Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed from a selfish, tight-fisted miser who could care less about the welfare of anybody else into a big-hearted, generous, and kind man. Part of what effects that transformation is his encounter with the ghost of Jack Marley, his former partner who has been dead for seven years. Interestingly, Marley’s ghost wears a long and heavy chain that he literally has to drag along with him. When Scrooge asks Marley about it, he says that he wears the chain he forged in life – a chain created by all the merciless, unjust, ruthless, and oppressive deeds he did in life. Marley claims that his chains were invisible until the day he died, he never saw them growing, he never knew they were there – they were simply invisible. However, biblical scholar and preacher Alan Brehm challenges that. He suggests that it is impossible for anyone to forge such a heavy chain of heartless attitudes and actions without feeling something of its weight in one’s life. That’s a very good point if you think about it. I don’t know how Dickens would respond to such a critique but I will say that we know that some folks who can pour an entire shaker full of salt onto their food every day never once taking into account the toll it takes; that doesn’t mean it still isn’t harming the body. Maybe the truth lies somewhere in between Marley and Brehm. Some folks don’t ever see the chains which grow with each careless action or word, but that doesn’t mean they are not visible to those with eyes to see. You are either part of the good news or the bad, but one thing is certain; you are not invisible or insignificant.

People take note of those who say they follow Jesus, we are not invisible or insignificant. Others take notice of our stumbling, our mistakes, our grumbling. They trip over them, just like we do, and some people will even tell you it is why they have lost interest in the church. They cannot see any difference between the people inside the church and the people outside, except that the people outside don’t pretend to be any better than they are. Yet, we are God’s baptized, those who have been given the gift of second sight. We can see spirit as

well as flesh. We know there is more going on than meets the eye. If there is anyone in the world equipped to care for people, body and soul, it should be us. When we look at people, we are taught to see them as whole, the way God meant them to be. When they are not whole, it hurts us, as if we are missing something we need for ourselves. Because of this, we must be like salt amongst ourselves, we must not take part in those things that diminish the soul of another human being. We can't stand by while someone is called names, or talked down to, or cast out, or even shows up at our borders with no safe place to return to, no government to create order, no food or shelter or clothing, none of the basic human essentials necessary for life available to them. We can't stand by because all these things wound the soul, perhaps even murder it, and it would be better for us to chop off pieces of our own bodies than to let that happen to us or anyone else. A wasted existence is hell, no two ways about it. Fortunately, there is an alternative. If we want to be whole, we can use our two good eyes to see the world the way God sees it, and we can use our two good feet to carry us into that world as deeply as we dare, and we can stretch out our still-attached arms to someone in danger of stumbling, so that God can steady and save us all.