

Sermon Manuscript: Mark 9:38-50

Be "Salty" Christians

19th Sunday after Pentecost – October 3, 2021

"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."

"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where

*"their worm does not die,
and the fire is not quenched."*

Everyone will be salted with fire.

"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other." [NIV]

Do you know the old joke about Twinkies? They say that if you put a Twinkie on a fence post and come back 10 years later the fence post will be gone but the Twinkie will still be there. It's because of the sorbic acid and potassium sorbate. "Included to preserve freshness." Food doesn't stay fresh on its own. It will eventually spoil unless we take steps to preserve it. These peaches are canned. The heat and hermetic seal keep bacteria from spoiling the fruit. This beef jerky is dried, salted, smoked and treated with sodium nitrate so that it keeps. From ancient times, salt was the most commonly used form of preservative. And it's that quality of salt that Jesus refers to in our text today. He is talking about preserving something that is the most precious of all. In order to do it he would tell us to BE **"SALTY" CHRISTIANS** who preserve the positive, preserve the weak and preserve ourselves.

1. Preserve the Positive

Jealousy is an ugly thing. But we see it here in John. He was worried about preservation. But what he wanted to preserve wasn't such a worthy thing. We heard last week about the disciples and their argument concerning who was the greatest. Jesus showed them that those who serve are the greatest. John's question comes immediately after that incident. He was

concerned about preserving his privileged position as a disciple of Jesus and so he asks about stopping a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. But the man wasn't an immediate follower of Jesus.

We should probably have a word about demon possession here. It is the condition in which a demon inhabits the victim and causes them to not be in control of themselves. Some would say that what is being described in the Bible is mental illness but the descriptions really are of something different. It is also something that seems to have only been common during Jesus' earthly ministry. It pretty much ceased shortly after his Ascension. It appears to be Satan offering a special challenge to Jesus during his time on earth. The problem was solved through the power of Jesus, which in this case was applied by this man whom John would have stopped.

What Jesus shows us here is that this man, even though he wasn't a regular follower of Jesus, must have had faith in him. He understood the power of Jesus' name and used it to drive out demons. Such an act was a work of faith. And such actions of love and worship for the Savior are precious things.

So Jesus' response to John is that he is to preserve the positive. Don't hinder this man's service, but rather encourage it. Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Anyone who does an act of love for Jesus, even the smallest one like giving a drink of water, is precious.

The trouble is that we can be like John and set up our own criteria for what is proper evidence of a Christian. Do we insist that the only way to properly show acts of faith is when someone is like us? Do we require people to meet our standards? Do they sing well enough or merely make a "joyful noise?" Do they show enough love for us or meet our unspoken expectations of treatment for us? Are we offended when our standards aren't met. When someone wrongs us, do we demand some very specific action as evidence of their repentance instead of forgiving and accepting them and their way of making it right? We can spoil our own hearts and maybe even the faith of another when we become "offended" by how they practice their Christianity.

In contrast, Jesus would call us to see that they are "for us." Everyone is both different and the same. We are all the same as sinners and all the same in our need for the grace of forgiveness. Other believers may not be in the same place we are. They are different people. They have different gifts from God's grace. They and we are at different levels in the maturity of our faith. Don't let how we each live out our faith be a source of looking down on or envying each other.

Instead Jesus would have us treasure and seek to preserve believers and their fruits of faith. Like we preserve the delicious fruits of harvest season, so let's preserve the positive acts of one another as believers. See such acts of love for God as something that is pleasing to him. Look with open minds. Treat one another with patience. Encourage each other with enthusiasm. And give thanks to God for the gifts he brings forth in his people.

Don't look down on the gifts of others and snuff out their love and enthusiasm for God. Jesus goes on to show us the reason to preserve the positive because in so doing we preserve the weak.

2. Preserve the Weak

Faith can be a delicate thing. Jesus talks about "these little ones." These are believers who are little in their faith. They may be children but also those who are new and immature and inexperienced as Christians. They may not know the pitfalls as well as more "seasoned" believers do.

He gives a warning about not "causing them to sin." This literally means not to lead them into a trap. It's like the box trap you may have tried to use to catch a rabbit or squirrel in your yard. It would also be like the big bear traps we have seen in cartoons. When the bait is touched, the trap snaps shut. It is a trap that leads to death. Jesus is using it to describe temptations and actions that lead to sin in others that can end in the loss of faith. It's like James describes it: *After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.* [James 1:15]

Those with a little faith are vulnerable to being trapped. They are like the people in Jesus' parable of the Sower and the Seed. Those who are like the shallow soil and the weed choked soil are easily led away from their faith into distraction and sin. Jesus gives us a dire warning here not to be involved in such leading.

He would have us handle the little ones with great care. The devil uses any means he can to destroy the faith of believers and he never plays fair. He will even use Christians to distract, deceive and destroy our brothers and sisters. Our actions or inactions can set a trap for those who are weak or immature in their faith. Paul said: *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.* [1 Corinthians 9:22] When we drink a beer, share information, use certain words or don't attend church, we can be sending a message to our fellow believers. We may not be doing anything sinful but the little ones might be led to think sin is OK. We are to always be aware of those around us and how what we do and say may affect them. We are to be the best examples we can be. We are to strive to encourage one another to grow in the faith.

Even though faith can be delicate, the object of our faith is not. It is completely firm because he is Christ! He came into our world to give us all strength. He said of himself: *A bruised reed he will not break, in a smoldering work he will not snowfall, till he leads justice to victory.* [Matthew 12:20] He came with complete love for all sinners. He has crush Satan's power. He came to seek and to save the lost!

Jesus has done all these things but how can we be prepared to preserve the weak. Where will we get the salt we need to do it? If we look closely at Jesus' words here we see where he puts the greatest emphasis. We become "salty" Christians when we preserve ourselves.

3. Preserve Ourselves

Jesus warns us about the traps that confront us every day. Hands, feet and eyes can become traps. Our bodies and minds are things that the devil, world and our own sinful nature use to entrap us in sin. And that sin can lead to unbelief if left unchecked. But we need to understand that Jesus is telling us that removing these physical organs won't stop the rampage of sin. What he is showing us is the seriousness of sin's trapping effect. Our bodies and minds are really only the instruments of what's inside. And what's inside is the germ of sin.

Sin is like the bacteria in food. It's always there. And if it's allowed to run unchecked it will become poisonous. Jesus is warning us not to leave our spiritual chicken salad out in the sun too long!! We need to avoid the traps that our sin would lead us into. We need to preserve our own faith in order to be able also to help others preserve theirs.

That's why Jesus tells us here to "have salt in yourselves." Salt represents what kills sin and preserves life. It is a picture of Jesus and the faith in him that comes through the gospel. Jesus is telling us to flee from sin and flee to him for strength to preserve our faith. Sin and the devil are our enemy. *Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.* [1 Timothy 5:8-9] But our source of strength and help to fight temptation and sin is Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews said: *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.* [Hebrews 2:18] And Paul tells us we will conquer through Christ: *In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, either height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* [Romans 8:37-39]

As we grow in our faith we learn to fight temptation and see the traps sin lays. Knowing there is a trap is the first step in avoiding it. And the next steps are relying on Jesus through the experience of faith to help us overcome.

This also enables us to learn the gentleness and patience we need to help the "little ones" in our lives. Temptation is the daily battle for all of us. But Jesus "salts us with fire." It is the fire of faith through his gospel good news. That salt preserves us. As Jesus said, *"No one can snatch them out of my hand."* [John 10:28] It is through the salt of what Jesus gives us that we are able to live in peace with one another.

Let us be filled with the salt of the gospel and so be preserved all our lives in this world. And may Jesus so preserve us that we can also help one another in our daily battle with sin to see temptation's traps and, with Christ's help, overcome them. Amen.