

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 ~ Mark 9:38-50

*Be at Peace with One Another*

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost ~ Stewardship of Time & Talents Commitment ~ Sept. 26, 2021

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*Introduction to Scripture Lesson*

Today's gospel lesson is hard. What you are about to hear me read is hard hear and harder to hear. It is also impossible to forget. That was probably Jesus' point. Time was getting short as they headed to Jerusalem, he knew he needed to land this lesson. If what I am about to read was a news story today, a warning would be issued that the content and images may be disturbing due to their violent content. Not suitable for children. Except in this case, Jesus was most likely still bouncing that little child on his lap as he was speaking. The one we heard about in last week's scripture, Mark 9:30-37.

It's been a long week, so I will remind you that last Sunday (just before we enjoyed all those wonderful and silly skits), we heard Jesus' teaching to his 12 disciples in response to their dumb argument about who was the greatest. Mark tells us that Jesus took a little child in his arms and said, "whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me." That was v. 37. Today we start with the very next verse, 38, and there is no indication that Jesus set down this little child, in fact his reference in v. 42 to "these little ones," suggests he is still letting this little child help him bring his point home.<sup>1</sup> Let us partake in the sacred as I now begin at verse 38.

*Sermon*

"You know me, never complain, never explain," said the Dowager Countess Grantham one afternoon at tea in Downton Abbey. Although it was this episode of the fictional show Downton Abbey where I first heard this saying, a quick google search taught me that the Dowager Countess was actually quoting Benjamin Disraeli, the Prime Minister of England in the 1870's. A man known for his diplomacy. While "never complain, never explain" may keep tea time pleasant and state diplomacy on track, if you think about it, complaining and explaining are the block and tackle that drive the ball forward in both of our scripture lessons today.

Did you hear all that complaining in the wilderness in the Numbers reading? The manna from heaven that had saved and nourished them—now they are sick of it. And they let Moses have it. Then Moses complains to God about these people he is trying to lead. Moses is at the end of his rope. God responds to Moses' complaint by having him gather seventy elders to share the burden of leadership, (yes, this is where we Presbyterians trace our ordination of Ruling Elders). But just then, a "young man" runs to Moses to complain about Eldad and Medad, two men who were not at the ordination (if you will) of the seventy, and yet were prophesying back at camp. "Stop them, Moses!"

The catalyst for our gospel story is John's complaint to Jesus about someone outside their circle successfully casting out demons in Jesus' name. John tells Jesus, "We tried to stop him," because kind of like Eldad and Medad, he was doing it without the proper credentials. John's complaint comes, right after Jesus, with a child on his knee, has said, "whoever welcomes one such child, welcomes me." Rather than "never complain, never explain," I hear a different

word for us today from our stories in Numbers and in Mark. Here it is: "No salt, no peace." I'll say it again, it's simply a summary of Jesus' message to his disciples as they make their way to Jerusalem, "No salt, no peace." Jesus concludes this whole section with the advice, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." And now I will attempt to explain.

I don't know about you, but I am finding it increasingly difficult to stomach the daily news. The Covid-19 pandemic which is not going away as much as we wish it would, continues to exacerbate divides and fractures within families, communities, states, and congress. As I see its impact on children, teens, and young adults, it makes me wonder about the future we are building for our children and grandchildren. We seem to be moving farther and farther away from anything that looks or feels like peace. Have we lost our saltiness? Jesus looked at the crowd in Matthew 5:13, and told them "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" That's the invitation I hear for us today. With the imminent threat of global climate change, and a global pandemic that refuses to release its grip, wherever we see ourselves politically, we share the need for constructive intervention near and far. Time to put first things first.

Jill Duffield, (Presbyterian Pastor and former Editor of the Presbyterian Outlook) puts it like this: *"Combatting evil, passing out cups of water, shaking salt all over the earth... Caring for little ones is more important than knowing our theology and being able to articulate it. Our challenge: to choose saltiness over stumbling blocks, prayer over pontificating, speaking up over personal safety, standing up to evil over circling the wagons, and living water instead of dusty, well-trodden paths. Better to get rid of my own hand, foot or eye than put up barriers that prevent another from knowing the love, justice, grace, mercy and peace of Jesus Christ."*<sup>iii</sup> Did you hear how Jesus put it? "Whoever is not against us is for us." He was redirecting his disciples to expand radically their idea of who might be on Jesus' team.

The major redirect that Jesus makes here is away from judging others and toward one's own choices, one's own style of life, one's own way of being and doing. That is Jesus' turn, and Jesus' question for us today, as well. No peace? Check your saltiness. Let's think about salt for a moment. Salt is used for flavoring cooking, preserving food, and disinfecting wounds: salt is a wonderfully multi-layered metaphor for God's redemptive power. How are we accessing and reflecting this healing, restoring power? Jesus wants us to ask ourselves: What are *you* saying or doing that serves as a stumbling block for children of the church, broadly for the vulnerable, the least of these? What are you doing or not doing that is preventing sincere and energetic service of God?

Don't let the arresting metaphors of hell, self-mutilation, the ever-active worm, or the perpetual fire divert us from the point Jesus is making here. This scripture is another riveting example of why we believe Jesus wants us to take his words seriously but not literally. Yes, Jesus is trying to get our attention and to get us to take him seriously. But he is not calling for self-mutilation. Jesus' metaphor about pruning the vine and its branches is perhaps less painful, to conjure. But the through line of both today's scripture and pruning the vine, is the necessary process of removing fruitless branches to promote further growth. Yes, it hurts. We'd rather

complain than prune. But Jesus is teaching us here: it's a necessary part of growing stronger, healthier, more centered, more salty: you must prune the attitudes, the behaviors that don't serve Christ or you.

My mother-in-love, Fran, Bob's mom, was a wise and deep and true (and fun-loving!) woman, who did not begin her vocation to be a psychotherapist until she was 52 years old. That was the year she began to work on her Masters in Counseling, that led her to continue her education and earn a PhD in Psychology. Of course, marrying a Presbyterian preacher in the 1950's, raising five children, and simply being Fran, she had *plenty* of practical experience doing therapy (kind of like Eldad and Medad and the person John was complaining about). She definitely hit the ground running as a therapist, continuing her thriving practice all the way into her 80's.

It was Fran who taught me, and then I learned first-hand in my own experience in therapy. If you want to grow emotionally and spiritually, if you really want to experience healing within the broken parts of yourself and your relationships with others: it has to get worse before it gets better. I think that's part of what Jesus is talking about here. It's going to hurt. The path to peace calls us into places we'd rather not go *if* our goal was to stay comfortable and to maintain the status quo. But that was not what Jesus went to the cross to save us for. We are not followers of the "Gospel of Comfort and Sameness," are we? We are not the followers of the gospel of "Never complain, never explain." We follow Jesus who taught us: no salt, no peace. In other words, "Have salt and be at peace with one another." Do whatever it takes to keep yourself from being a scandalous hindrance to the work of the Lord.

How are we doing here at FPC at welcoming children? Afghan child refugees, living temporarily at this moment only 67 miles from us; my heart goes out to the Haitian child refugees, whose parents are desperately seeking a cup of cold anything that would nourish and protect them, and still there are children and parents separated at the Mexican border by the United States government. These children are crying out to us. Through them, the Spirit calls. Jesus teaches his disciples in Mark 9 what we are to do: Do not argue over who is the greatest. Be at peace. Do not set yourself against your allies. Be at peace. Do not let your behavior scandalize others, especially children. Be at peace. Whoever is not against us is for us. The more, the wider, the better.

*Let us pray:*

Creator of the rivers and oceans, who washes us clean and refreshes us daily, help us to be like a cup of cold water to others in your name: refreshing, cleansing, and relieving. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Philip Ruge-Jones, "Commentary on Mark 9:38-50," *Working Preacher*, September 30, 2018, made this observation.

<sup>ii</sup> Jill Duffield, *Lectionary Reflections Cycle B: Lectionary Bible Commentary for Preachers and Teachers*, (CSS Publishing Company: Lima, OH, 2020), pp.198-200.