

Pentecost 17b, September 26, 2021

Mark 9:38-50

The first thing to know about salt is that salt is salt.

No matter it comes from or where it is found, salt is NaCl – Sodium Chloride. . .
 and if I remember my Grade 10 Chemistry--which, of course,
 was when I was primarily concerned with how to walk upright
 while carrying fire from one cave to another—
 if I remember rightly, salt can't lose its flavour
 or alter its chemical makeup.

The only thing you can do to change the nature of salt is to get it wet. . .
 and then its crystalline structure fuses the grains into a solid block.
 How about that for a baptismal image?
 A washed and wet rock that only gets firmer and stronger
 the more pressure it undergoes.

The second thing about salt is that it is omnipresent—that is, it is everywhere.
 Salt always has been, always is, and always will be.
 And because salt is so common, it seems like it is “common”. . .
 that is, not very “special” or “unique” or “singular.”

But when Jesus calls us “salt,” he’s not saying that we are “common”
 in the sense of being dull and boring; but that we are “ordinary”. . .
 and that all we need to be is ordinary. . .
 because being ordinary is good enough for God.
 And so we dare never underestimate the role we play
 in God’s good work of seasoning, purifying,
 nourishing and preserving the world.

Furthermore, if you want or need an illustration of how important the ordinary is,
 take a glance at what has unfolded over the past 2000 years.
 The very idea of Jesus telling a couple of dozen people
 that they are going to be the means used
 to bring about the salvation of the whole creation--
 well, you would have had to laugh.

After all, Jesus' disciples and followers
 weren't exactly the sharpest knives in the drawer;
 and when it came to influence or vision or courage,
 they didn't have a lot going for them.

They lived in a remote part of the Roman empire;
 they had no political clout; no significant amounts of money;
 no prestige or social standing; no education to speak of;
 no weight to bring to bear on the wealthy or powerful.
 And yet, in spite of all those limitations,
 these little grains of salt—became salt-shakers—
 and shook the foundations of the world.

The academies and philosophical schools
 of the Platonists, Stoics and Epicureans faded away;
 the Great Library at Alexandria in Egypt burned to the ground;
 Rome's legions were scattered and the Empire fell;
 but that little band of pilgrims called the “church”--
 that tiny pinch of God’s salt--lasted. . .and even flourished.

It entrenched itself in the Graeco-Roman world; it penetrated Caesar’s household;
 it carried humanity through the Dark Ages; it survived the Renaissance,
 the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. . .
 and, like the old Ever-Ready Bunny, it is still going. . .
 and going. . .and going--even in our post-Christian, post-feminist,
 post-democratic, post-modern, post-denominational, post-9/11 age.

Granted, the church is struggling these days--at least here in North America.
 Numbers are falling. . .contributions are plummeting. . .
 and the prospects don’t look terribly inviting. . .
 especially since fewer and fewer Christians are doing any inviting.

As a matter of fact, today’s situation in Canada
 is a lot like that of Jesus' followers listening to him
 say these words from Mark two millennia ago—
 and that reality ought to be some comfort to us today
 in the midst of what seems to be the utter failure of the church
 to make a similar and significant impact on the world.

But there is no reason for us to lose heart. God isn’t on a salt-free diet.
 Indeed, your presence here, in this place, today--
 thousands and thousands of kilometers from where
 these original words were spoken and then written—
 your presence here—for whatever reason—

your presence here, in this place, on this day. . .
 and, even more, staying awake while hearing these words—
 is one more modest proof that the incredible has happened—
 that God's salt has done, is doing and will continue to do its job
 of seasoning, purifying, nourishing, preserving and healing the earth.

Now, I know that Jesus' expectation of us to do and to be that—
 to be salt of the earth and salt for the earth--
 I know that such an expectation doesn't sound
 altogether fair. . .or easy. . .and frankly, it isn't.

It is a little like the old joke which goes:
 "I'd give my right arm to be able to play the piano like that."

In the same way, anybody who hears these words of Jesus
 telling us that citizenship in or possession of the kingdom
 is worth whatever price we have to pay—
 up to and including an eye or arm or a leg—
 anybody who hears those words and still says
 that grace is cheap and talk is cheap
 just hasn't been paying attention.

Because in these and in many other verses in his Gospel,
 Mark reminds us that following Jesus has never been a walk in the park,
 but is more accurately a journey to the cross. . .a pilgrimage
 more perilous and demanding and enriching than we can ever imagine.

A woman tourist from the west was admiring a local necklace.
 "What is it made of?" she asked.
 "Alligator teeth, ma'am," said the native. "Oh, I see," she replied.
 "I suppose they have the same value for you that pearls have for us."
 "Not quite," he responded. "You see, anyone can open an oyster."

Wise and enlightened people understand that a diamond
 is nothing more than a non-descript, ordinary stone. . .
 until it is given its value and worth by humans
 willing to pay a high price for it.

In the same way, being a grain of God's salt
 and a disciple of the true salt which seasons the world. . .
 being God's salt can be as big or small a deal as we choose to make it--

meaning that, yes, discipleship is sometimes difficult
 and, yes, that discipleship always costs us something--
 but, when you consider who it is we are called to follow
 and what a privilege and joy it is to do so--
 well, it is sometimes hard to keep from laughing ourselves silly
 while reaching out with our artificial hand to pick up the tab.

And that brings me to the last thing about salt—and it is both good and bad news:
 The bad news being that Jesus is telling us
 that there is the very real possibility of us "losing our saltiness"
 or "losing our purpose" and, as Glenn put it last week,
 “losing our courage” or “losing our wisdom”--
 that is, losing those unique characteristics and qualities
 that make us effective and useful to God and to the world.

Jesus wants us to know, clearly and right up front,
 that our task as salt, as disciples, as Christians, as Church
 is to season or spice up the world in such a way
 that the world becomes different.

Being a Christian. . .being a member of the church. . .being the church
 is never an end in itself--but a means to a greater end--
 the greater end being the opportunity we are given and have
 to work with Christ and in Christ in serving, mending and healing
 a broken, hungry and hurting world.

And if we cannot or will not carry out that function--
 then we are not only denying the very reason for our existence as salt
 but we are of little or no value to anyone. . .including God.

In other words, if the "saltiness" of the church is washed out
 or is diluted to the point of meaninglessness. . .
 and if all that is left is the appearance of respectability--
 nice looking buildings, well-crafted worship,
 an ecclesiastical structure and system simply going through the motions—

if all that is left is not really "salt" but merely a "salt substitute"--
 something that may taste a bit like the real thing but is obviously
 fake or phony or simulated, then what is left of the church
 isn't much good anymore and needs to be thrown out.

Now, I know that that sounds rather hard-nosed and uncompromising--
 but sometimes that's the way Jesus is. . .and the way he speaks--
 and we need to take what he says very seriously.

And I think he is telling us in these words that it is very easy these days
 for us as the church to be too timid or tentative
 in our seasoning of the society around us. . .
 and that we need to spice things up a little.

I think he is warning us about being too insipid or wimpy
 in our proclamation of the theology of the cross:
 the truth that all people are in desperate need of forgiveness, healing,
 acceptance and new life--and that those exact gifts are there
 for any and for all, no matter who and no matter what they are. . .
 and no matter how bland or tasteless their lives seem to be.

I think he is cautioning us against being too passive and fearful
 about following up our proclamation with action--
 acts that befit a people who claim to practice what they preach.

According to an ancient Indian fable, a mouse was in distress because of its fear of the cat. A magician took pity on it and turned it into a cat. But then it became afraid of the dog. So the magician turned it into a dog. Then it began to fear the lion, so the magician turned it into a lion; whereupon it was full of fear of the hunter. At this point the magician gave up and turned it back into a mouse saying, "Nothing I do for you is going to be of any help because you have the heart of a mouse."

Sometimes we who are in the church and we who are the church
 are too afraid to speak out against what we know to be wrong
 or to stand up for what we know to be right—
 not because we might **actually** suffer any terrible consequences,
 but simply because we **think** we might.

All of us know from our own experience--and from the recent fear-and-smear
 campaign speeches and the ever-present 3" headlines
 scrolling or screaming "Be very afraid!". . .
 all of us know that our imaginations and dreams
 can manufacture far more terrifying possible outcomes
 than anything that can actually happen--

which is how and why politicians and media-managers can manipulate us
 into giving up or giving away our human decency
 in exchange for “the world the way it used to be”—
 that is, safe and comfortable, white and male. . .
 and how authors or political leaders or horror-movie producers
 make fortunes or make trouble--because they know how
 to capitalize on and take advantage of our ability to get frightened—
 or, more accurately, to frighten ourselves--
 not with what **will** happen. . .but with what **might** happen.

So, to be the kind of “salt” that Jesus calls us and wants us to be
 means to be know who we are and whose we are and what we are about--
 and then to be brave enough, visionary enough, courageous enough,
 willing enough and trusting enough to sacrifice whatever is necessary
 to do and to be exactly that. . .salt of and for the earth. . .and for all on the earth.

At the same time, however, I need, and want, to add. . .this pinch of good news. . .
 which is that Jesus is not saying or implying that we as individuals
 or as a parish or as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church--
 that we have to do something grand or glorious or spectacular
 in order to be salt that make a difference.

On the contrary: We are to remember that it is the "littleness" of salt—
 its "tininess"—even its apparent insignificance--that makes it effective
 and allows it to change the taste and the character
 of something much larger and more dominant.

So, we don't have to be noticeable, big, even revolutionary to be useful.
 All we need to be is obedient and faithful. . .
 obedient and faithful to the One who can and does
 accomplish far more in us and in the world
 than anybody could ever conceive of—
 which means that our value as good and useful salt salt
 is not dependent upon our ability to be salty. . .
 but rather depends upon the true Salt who, in a little wafer and a sip of wine
 is at work in, with and among us seasoning and saving the world through us.

Amen.

SDG