

Proper 21, 17 Pentecost

“Got Salt?”

Mark 9: 38-50

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts Sept. 26, 2009

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In the name of the One Holy and Living God. *Amen.*

*“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones... it would be 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 never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”*

Well... I have to tell you, there's been quite a stir on Facebook this week among my clergy friends regarding our lectionary texts for today. Jesus is charging us with the mentoring of those newest in their faith, upon threat of nothing less than the unquenchable fires and the worms of hell. You can imagine that for many of my Facebook-friends, nails are bitten and hair pulled out over how to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ given these challenging and mysterious words. One friend writes, “Forget the fires of hell; I'm going with James.” Another writes, “Thank God for Esther, because I am not preaching about worms.”

Finally there are those friends, grateful not to be preaching at all this week, who just say “Good luck with that, people!” This is a challenging Gospel text. Jesus' teachings are always challenging, aren't they – he would not have given his precious few years of ministry to anything less – and these lessons are hard indeed. But my promise to you as one of your priests is to be willing to take on the challenging aspects of our text, as best I can in my small way, in return for all that he gave to teach us. And, in fact, instead of feeling a sort of dread about preaching on this, I am actually grateful for the opportunity to talk to you about what, in my humble opinion, I believe Jesus Christ teaches us today.

As always in the interpretation of scripture, the gifts of perspective, context, and language help us so much. We remember that Jesus, having willingly emptied himself of his divinity at his conception, is speaking to his disciples on this day as fully human: a learned and devout Jew, fully educated in the practices of his culture, his religion, and his time. In describing the fate of anyone of his time who acted as a stumbling block to “*these little ones,*” he uses the term “gehenna of fire,” a term which was changed over the years by our translators to the word “hell.”

In Jesus' time, this “gehenna of fire” was another term for the Valley of Hinnon, an area just south of Jerusalem, where the city's trash was burned.

This was the place where anything considered unclean was burned - for example, all of those unacceptable parts of the required animal sacrifices that we read about in such detail in Leviticus. This Valley of Hinnon, known regionally as the gehenna of fire, was the place where these ritually unclean things were salted for purification, and then burned clean into smoke and ash. This was certainly not a good place to be. It was a place to be avoided at all costs, given the ritual uncleanness it brought upon those who came near to it. It was basically the town dump, but one with an aspect of deep impurity associated with it.

Now, for faithful Jews, the belief system then, and now, holds that, upon death, every person, whether considered righteous or unrighteous, goes down to sheol, the “abode of the dead” which is the grave, to await their resurrection. We read about this in Ecclesiastes and in Job. The word “sheol” is used over sixty times in our Old Testament, and refers to a dark waiting place between death and resurrection. But in this underworld of sheol, the waiting is either done in comfort, “*in the bosom of Abraham,*” or in torment, awaiting their judgement. It is this second aspect of sheol, this long waiting in torment, which became associated with the fire of gehenna, and became a symbol for the “fate of the unclean.” Needless to say, the evolution of the concept of hell has a long and convoluted history, but it was a concept very much a part of the world and culture of Jesus. To die unclean in Jesus’ time was to be thrown into the purifying fires for the eternity it would take before the resurrection.

Jesus knew these things. And, although emptied of his divinity, he also knew of, and had agreed to, the basic plan set in motion with his incarnation and mission. He knew that he would be killed, and that in three days would rise again. He knew that his death would gather up the sins of the whole world, and that his resurrection would raise all God’s people into eternal life with him. What many Christians believe is that those three days between his death and resurrection were willingly spent by our Lord, by his choice, in this place of torment, this gehenna of fire, purifying and abolishing it for all time. After his resurrection, sheol was no more; after his resurrection, *hell was vanquished.* Now many Christians believe otherwise - that God continues to condemn his people to eternal torment. But I believe that the death and resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ caused a seismic shift in the history of mankind, and that nothing has ever been the same since. Now, if this is not the Good News of Jesus Christ, I cannot think what is, and I can’t think of anything I am more compelled to share. Jesus the Christ reached into the past, the present, and the future to gather up all of God’s beloved children – gathered them up from the depths of hell, lifted them from beyond the divisions of religion, and culture, and belief systems: forgiving, purifying, and placing us back soundly into the arms and the light of God.

Now it would seem a fitting end to close here, and to allow time to ponder these things among the wide range of possibilities that exists within our Christian tradition. But our scripture gives us another mystery to deal with today, and since it is particularly confounding, I would be remiss not to address it. So here we go. Jesus said, “*For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*”

“Oh, great,” I thought. “Oh, brother!” said my Facebook friends. “*Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another...*” And so back to the translation, and into the books, to learn that the value of salt in Jesus’ time was particularly precious. So precious that the Roman soldiers of that time were paid not in coinage, but in salt. The trade routes were brutally guarded to ensure the safe transport of this mineral that was so unique, nothing could replace it.

So important that life itself depended on it: to be without salt, especially in those arid climates, was a death sentence, and to be without it’s capacity to preserve and purify foods would be to die of hunger in the lean months. Salt was absolutely precious. So precious, in fact, that the custom developed between leaders of tribes and nations to sit down and to share salt together if they wanted to seal a pact of lasting concord. The sharing of salt became the *ultimate symbol of peacemaking.*

And so imagine my relief when I understood that to “*have salt in ourselves*” means to have concord within, to have peace, within. And to have peace within allows us the possibility to grow towards peace with one another. Suddenly I’m envisioning our beautiful big “Got Peace?” signs reworked to say “Got Salt?” – but maybe that wouldn’t be the best idea.

But, you see, I think I understand. Jesus reminds us today that the “gehenna of eternal fire” no longer awaits us. Our judgement day will most certainly come, when our eyes will be opened and we will truly see and mourn all the ways in which we have caused hurt. But we will all be purified and made ready for eternal life through our Lord’s saving reach on the cross. Jesus reminds us today that all God’s creation is beloved, irreplaceable, and welcomed home in the end. However, he also teaches us that in the meantime, we must “*have salt in ourselves*,” we must find peace within ourselves, and among each other. And so I have a question for you. How will you find peace? How will you create it within you, and among you? *This is not a small thing*. It is not something reserved for those with the luxury of leisure-time, or the ease of a light-weight life. Finding peace, making peace, is our only hope for the world; it is what Jesus Christ, the Lord of Lords, charges us with.

It is my humble belief that what Jesus said, and what he did, was for the sake of our very lives – not only our life after death, but our life in the flesh, right now. What might it mean to someone struggling with the concepts of sin and hell, and the fires of eternal damnation? What change could it bring for that person to know that they are loved by God, created to be their unique self, made to live their life with authenticity and dignity, as irreplaceable and precious as salt; as God’s very own. What could it mean to hear that they are loved and forgiven, made worthy of heaven? It could save their life.

And what could it mean for the life of the world if people of all cultures, all nations and traditions, could have lasting concord, if they could see each other as precious and irreplaceable, equally beloved by the same Creator God? Are we strong enough in our faith, are we sure enough of the scope and power of Jesus Christ, that we can envision all people at peace within themselves, living in peace among each other? It could mean that this extraordinary, irreplaceable, beautiful little planet, “*this fragile earth, our island home*” could survive us – could flourish - in honor of the King of Creation, who entrusted it to us, in the wild hope that we could learn to make peace.

There is a lot at stake, this “having salt,” this “getting peace.” This is serious business. We are forgiven, free, purified and welcomed home, and this is good news like no other. But right now we have work to do to answer Jesus’ charge to us to be peacemakers. How will you answer him?

Amen.

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