

A Cup of Cold Water and a Pinch of Salt

Psalm 19:7-14; Mark 9:38-50

September 26, 2021

18th Sunday after Pentecost

I am going to skip the middle part of Mark's gospel today about cutting off the limbs of your body and maiming yourself if it becomes a hindrance spiritually! I thought you would appreciate that. Some parts of the bible are *not* meant to be taken literally!

But the part I would like to get to is this: Jesus said, "For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, I tell you truly, he will not lose his reward." 9:41 Just nine verses later, Jesus also said, "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." 9:50

Both of these verses are intriguing. Obviously, Jesus thought both images were important in his teaching. It boils down to this: No act of kindness done in the name of Christ is ever lost or wasted – even if it wasn't done by one of the disciples. Every single person is precious in God's sight. Every single one.

We should do what Jesus himself would do if he were here, and of course, he is. That divine DNA is imprinted upon each one of us. There is a spiritual, mystical quality about Jesus I have connected with over the years.

What if you could talk to him like you would a spouse or friend? What if he was there to listen to your prayers and lift your burdens? He does. What a difference it makes in your life. I know many of you are keyed into that with the prayer chain.

Many days during periods of meditation, I try to focus on the reality of the divine that is a part of you and me. The divine is interwoven with the human. They are not separate, and it is not either or, as John Philip Newell and Richard Rohr constantly point out. We need to get beyond our dualistic thinking that Western Christianity has been so good at for centuries, much to our detriment.

What Jesus is offering you today is a cup of cold water and a pinch of salt to season your soul and strengthen your faith. It is also an invitation to reach out to others. But back to the disciples – they needed to get back to the basics. You remember that just prior to this, the disciples had been arguing with each other about who was the greatest as I talked about last week. Jesus scolded them, and told them that, "Whoever wants to be first must be last, and servant of all." (9:35)

Apparently, they still didn't get it. One overarching theme you might have picked up from our gospel readings the past several weeks is that the disciples are still stumbling

and bumbling around. John, the son of Zebedee comes to Jesus and says, "Jesus, I found someone who was casting out demons in your name. I told him to quit!" What else are they going to think of?

John expected to be commended by Jesus for stopping someone else from healing who was not a part of their elite group. Note that John says, "He was not following *us*. I always thought when reading this passage that you could make a case for other religions pursuing the truth, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and of course Judaism. I believe that even more adamantly since moving to Marin and encountering some new people and experiences. An open mind is a wonderful thing.

John had envisioned an exclusive club that had a corner on the truth. Jesus set him straight. It was another sign that John and the company of disciples came up short, and Jesus let them know just how much they still had to learn. It wouldn't be surprising if we have more to learn, too.

Jesus responded to John and the disciples by saying, "Do not stop them; for no one who does a deed of good power in *my* name will be able to speak evil of me." (9:39) A cup of cold water given in genuine care is an act of compassion and caring. It was also laden with a deeper meaning of water given to a dry and thirsty soul. The example of the Samaritan woman at the well giving Jesus a drink of cold water comes to mind. It was an act of compassion.

The word compassion comes from the Latin word meaning, "to suffer with." Jesus freely and willingly came into the lives of others to share their burdens and impart his wisdom and companionship. That's what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples. That's what he is trying to teach us. It's the kind of life Jesus is encouraging us to live.

When is the last time someone offered you a cup of cold water in his name? Or how about last time someone extended compassion and care to you like a pinch of salt? Perhaps you were on the giving end to others. A cup of cold water for a dry and thirsty soul . . . an act of compassion and kindness done in the name of Jesus . . . or seasoning a life like a pinch of salt.

Jesus said, "No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of me." No act of kindness or compassion will go unpaid or unappreciated. As Paul puts it in Philippians 2--

"4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness . . . 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross."

Com-passion -- the willingness to enter in and suffer with someone. Jesus said, "Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, I tell you truly, he will not lose his reward." 9:41

As for salt, Jesus said, "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." v. 50 This is not the first time that Jesus had used the metaphor of salt when he was describing a faithful disciple. In Matthew 5:13, he said, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot."

Sometimes in the early church, they talked about becoming "salty disciples." Think of it as being seasoned and experienced. In the days of Jesus, salt was a valuable and scarce commodity. The Roman Empire used to pay their soldiers with salt (and thus the word "salary" comes from the same Latin root for salt). But don't try to pay your bills with salt today. It might not be accepted! And don't pay your pledge that way, either!

In that day without refrigerators, salt was necessary to preserve food such as vegetables and fish. And when a new baby was born, they would wash them in salt water for medicinal purposes. It was thought that salt water would help preserve the baby's life.

In the early church, there was a tradition that those being baptized had a pinch of salt placed on their tongues -- symbolizing the value of water and salt. It was said that a person's life was as valuable as a bag of salt -- probably not a compliment to someone today. Maybe that's where the expression, "He or she is worth their salt" came from. The implication is that just as food is bland without salt, the believer is ineffective without seasoning. A seasoned disciple can make a difference -- something the twelve disciples did not seem capable of very often until after Jesus was risen.

Speaking of Salt, about a year ago, David made me aware of a wonderful organization called SALT. You can sign up for their weekly emails, and they said you a wonderful collection of poetry, stories, short videos and articles all on the subject of living a more seasoned spiritual life. You can go to the website, saltproject.org to learn more.

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So, what does it mean to be a seasoned disciple or salty believer today? A story is told of a missionary who was swept overboard while traveling on very high and rough seas, and was subsequently washed up on a beach at the edge of a remote village.

Nearly dead from exposure and lack of food and fresh water, he was found by the people of the village and nursed back to health. He lived among them for twenty years, quietly adapting to their culture and working alongside them. He preached no sermons, and made no personal faith claim. Neither did he read scripture to them.

But when people were sick, he sat with them, sometimes all night. When people were hungry, he fed them. When people were lonely, he gave a listening ear. He taught the ignorant and always took the side of the one who had been wronged.

The day came when his fellow missionaries, separated over the years, entered the same village and began talking to the people about a man named Jesus. After listening for a while to their story, the native people began insisting that Jesus had already been living in their village for many years. I bet you can guess what happened next. “Come,” one of them said, “We’ll introduce you to him.” The missionaries were led to a hut where they found their long-lost companion.

The noted preacher Henry Emerson Fosdick once said, “Preach the gospel at all times—and when necessary, use words.” Only when necessary, use words. Let your light shine. The missionary’s actions in this story demonstrated what it meant to be a “salty believer” as he lived out the gospel through his actions and not just words.

“Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another,” Jesus said. Jesus seasons our lives with a pinch of salt to enrich our faith that we might enrich the lives of others. He provides a cup of cold water to refresh our souls. Sometimes a cup of cold water and a pinch of salt is all that is needed for faith to grow, and so today, I wish for you a cup of cold water and a pinch of salt. Sometimes it’s just what the doctor ordered. Amen.

Psalm 19:7-14

19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

19:8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

19:9 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

19:10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

19:11 Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

19:12 But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

19:13 Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Mark 9:38-50

9:38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

9:39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

9:40 Whoever is not against us is for us.

9:41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

9:42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

9:43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

9:45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.

9:47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,

9:48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

9:49 "For everyone will be salted with fire.

9:50 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."