

27 September 2015 (18th Sunday After Pentecost/26th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Salt Life: A Dialogue”
Mark 9:38-50

The Presbyterian University Center can sometimes be misleading by name. One would assume that the students who attend are in fact, Presbyterian. While that is the case most of the time, it is not the case for a handful of our students. We have some who have grown up Anglican or Catholic. One who comes from a small denomination called Covenant and even a Baptist.

But all of these can be reasonably explained with an argument such as “We’re all Christian.” Maybe it was a friend, or the location, or the lack of a campus ministry for their specific denomination that drew them in to our Christian community. However, there is one student, we’ll call Emily, that doesn’t fall into any of the above categories. You see, Emily identifies as atheist. And yet this atheist is willing to sit through Bible studies and group discussions, drive students to Target for our welcome week activities, and take part in Monday night yoga classes.

That’s because Emily has this longing that PUC has filled. She has a desire to connect with others in meaningful relationships. She, like most of us, wants to know that she belongs, that she has a place where not only she is welcomed, but she is loved. PUC has been that for her without pretense. The students love Emily for who she is and what she brings to our community. And even if it’s not the language Emily would use, we recognize that she is a loved child of God and so we will always treat her as such.

What do we do with people who don’t fit into our categories? What do we do with someone who feels drawn to a faith community but doesn’t know why? Communities are funny things. While intending to be welcoming, they can quickly become gated and exclusive. They ask in actions as much as in words, “Are you one of us?” One day while in Capernaum, John complained to Jesus that someone outside their circle was using Jesus’ name to cast out demons. John didn’t think this renegade healer was supposed to be doing that. Didn’t this guy know that he was supposed to apply for admission into their little band first before he could use their letterhead? Didn’t he know that he was supposed to play by the rules? “Do something about him, Jesus! Make him stop! He’s not one of us!” But Jesus’ response is as unsettling as was his response to the disciples’ vying with each other for the title of “greatest disciple.” Jesus effectively told John, “Don’t stop him. My name is big enough for many acts of mercy.”

As children are keenly aware of their smallness and yearn to be welcomed and received by adults who hold power in the world, we disciples can celebrate free use of Jesus’ name by all sorts of people whom we might not necessarily have thought to include in our categories. We know that people long to belong. God knows that people

long to belong. So maybe Jesus has already gone before us, preparing the way, and maybe God's Spirit is busy drawing people with a deep longing into our midst.

Just like children yearn to be welcomed by adults, Jesus references those who believe as "little ones". Like the disciples, we too hear the warning from Christ. Do not be a stumbling block. In fact, "if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off!" Jesus seems a little extreme here, but the intensity of his language helps us understand that without a doubt we are not to get in the way of those following God. It's easy to think, "Well I'm not blocking our church doors. I'm not being a stumbling block." But it's easy to subtly be a stumbling block.

We ran into this when I first began volunteering at PUC this past spring. You see there were two factions if you will. The old guard of students who had been at PUC for their entire FSU career and new students that were giving PUC a try for the first time. The old guard didn't say anything, to deter folks from coming. However, they sat off in corners, holding their own conversations, thinking little about widening their circle for others to join or feel welcome. One new student confided in me, "It's clear that I don't belong here. There's already a community and no room for me."

We as a group were quickly becoming a stumbling block for visitors. If nothing changed, then no growth was going to occur. Thankfully, the leadership recognized this and began modeling ways to include others. We called visitors by name as they walked in the room. We bounced around, joining in different conversations and they have slowly caught on. You wouldn't be able to identify any guard now. And I think this is exactly what Jesus intended.

I find that as disciples, we subtly put up barriers, even when we are well-meaning. Christ does not call us to dress a certain way, but somehow a dress code is often implied for worshipers gathered on Sunday morning. For whom might this be a stumbling block? And with most churches gatherings for worship exclusively on Sunday mornings, whom are we excluding? Have we set the expectation that those who follow Christ will use right language or behave a certain way? You have to be willing to pray out loud. No cursing and definitely, no tattoos. Have our actions or expectations conveyed that who God made someone to be is deficient? Does our language toward other denominations and faiths speak with the unity Christ showed, or does it divide?

Some friends of mine were look for a church to join as a couple, after they got engaged. He had grown up a Mormon, but wanted to join a protestant church since his wife had grown up Presbyterian. Each week they picked a congregation with which to worship. And somehow, each week, a different pastor in their sermon was derogatory about Mormons. Though he no longer identified as Mormon, he was still quite put off by someone who loved God preaching hate, particularly toward those who my friend still loved and respected. My friends had the gift of perseverance;

they kept searching for a church. But, how many people have not – how many people would not – after such an experience?

The news this week has been captivated with stories of Pope Francis' visit to the US. He has given numerous speeches, homilies, and prayers. But as I prepared for this sermon, some of his unprepared remarks stood out to me most. After his address to congress on Thursday, Francis greeted a crowd of thousands gathered at the US Capitol. Toward the end of his remarks he asked those who gathered to pray for him. However, he didn't end there. "If there are any among you," he said, "who do not believe or cannot pray, I ask you to please send good wishes my way." In this gesture, we have an example of how not to be a stumbling block.

In his continued instruction to the disciples, Jesus uses strong language, extreme images of sacrifice to impress upon them how severely God judges anyone who stands as a stumbling block to belief. Why did Jesus use such extreme language? The context of Jesus' continued references to his betrayal, suffering, death, and rising again, the disciples' bewilderment, and the increasing tension with the Pharisees is feeding into the dramatic tone of Mark's Gospel. Clearly Jesus is not mincing words with the disciples. He is hard on them. But in the community setting in which Mark's Gospel would have been read and applied, suffering and sacrifice for the sake of the gospel was all too real. Nero's Rome was a savage place, and the temptation to assimilate and fit in religiously was intense. Jesus' words about cutting off one's hand or leg or foot in order to preserve one's spiritual life and keep someone else faithful to Christ would not have been lost on Mark's audience. They were living that reality every day. They knew that the Romans executed religious zealots who were considered threats to the empire by tying millstones around their necks and throwing them into the sea. Better, though, to be executed by the Romans than to be found guilty by God of keeping someone from approaching the throne of grace and mercy, someone longing for salvation but alienated by the very people who were supposed to be welcoming them into God's realm. If there was one thing Jesus wanted to impress upon his disciples, it was that they could not erect barriers to the Gospel. It was not up to them to judge who was eligible or not eligible to enter the inner circle, but rather to look for ways to open the doors, to reach out and engage those who felt alienated and marginalized from the realm of God.

Partially because of my background as a Christian Educator for Children, and possibly because I'm a bit stubborn and independent - I really dislike instructions that come in the form of "don't do that!" I much prefer the positive offer. However, Christ needed to offer these harsh words because reaching out isn't easy. It requires being willing to open up, to put yourself out there, to be less sure of our rightness and another's wrongness. It may require sacrifice. It can bless our hearts, but it can also break them. Christ was preparing the disciples to open their ministry and hearts to others and in doing so he was also preparing them to sacrifice themselves and to have their hearts broken.

Christ doesn't offer only the "what not to do" instructions, but comes around with a call for the disciples to have salt in themselves, to open up, to go out and

minister, and to “be at peace with one another.” Marie engaged in the sort of outreach that I think Jesus would have commended. She cared for a single mom and her family that struggled immensely. Marie did not just give her money, but she took her under her wing to teach her things like how to shop, comparing things on a price per unit basis and not just on total price. She helped the mom get back in school. She became her friend. Marie’s outreach was borne of love and care. When this outreach was ultimately rejected after years of sacrifice, it was heartbreaking. We could get cynical after an experience like this, but Jesus’ call here is not concerned with what others do but with what we do, with who we are. It is our responsibility to make sure that we are retaining our saltiness that we are working toward peace with one another.

Some would reject outreach as futile just as some have rejected any hope of peace in the Middle East. But we as the people of God are not only to continue working for peace but in doing so we are to regularly examine ourselves to see how we might be hindering that for ourselves and for others. As those who belong to God, we are to recognize that longing in others and do what we can to help them find their belonging too. Sometimes this means that we must recognize that they’re belonging may not look exactly like ours. Our focus is simple: continue to do the work of God and do everything we can to allow others to see and participate in that work, whether alongside us or with a different label.

It all comes down to extending life in all its fullness, to be “salt life” to the world around us. That phrase and its distinctive logo can be found on nearly every pickup truck in Tallahassee—and no doubt many whose vehicles bear its name are probably out fishing while we’re here as a worshipping community. But “salt life” carries with it a mighty positive association, one of joy and happiness, of rest and recreation—and when augmented by Jesus’ references to salt, it has an even fuller meaning of life lived deeply in obedience to and in celebration of God’s love. When Jesus talked about being “salted with fire,” he was referring to the requirement that sacrifices offered in the temple had to be salted. He’s telling the disciples that their lives are sacrifices offered on God’s altar, and that if they’re salted, they are suffering for the sake of the Gospel, because their own selfish ambitions and intentions are being purged to make room for God’s love and care for others. At the same time, Jesus knew well that salt could lose its effectiveness, its actual saltiness, as happened in the Dead Sea. The salt in the Dead Sea turned dull and bland because the Dead Sea was a stagnant body of water that lacked refreshment and replenishment from other sources. How fitting, then, that Jesus used this metaphor to describe an exclusive, gated community of believers. Left locked up long enough, they would eventually turn into an insipid band of judgmental hypocrites, no different than the Pharisees who so fiercely resisted Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God. Thus, when Jesus told the disciples to have “salt in yourselves,” he meant that true salt life had to involve total commitment to God’s realm, not to each other, and that therein resided their peace.

In the life of the church, we make a big deal of membership, of commitment to this community—and rightly so. It means something to be part of a group of believers,

knowing that the bond we share in Christ is stronger than death. But if membership in a community devolves into “members only, others need not apply,” its salt becomes insipid, just like the Dead Sea. Ultimately, “salt life” is the life of the Gospel, a life lived in the joyful communion of saints, a life intended to be spread and sprinkled wherever we go, upon whomever we encounter. In Jesus Christ, we make life taste good, and we preserve it for others to enjoy as a gift from God, an irresistible feast wherever the communion of saints is shared.



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