

## Salted With Christ

Today's message comes with the title, Salted With Christ. It is an idea we find beautifully expressed in our epistle, where James writes: "Are any of you suffering? They should pray. ... Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church. ... Pray for one another, so that you may be healed."

That's the prescription for a community sated with the love, concern and compassion of Christ. It is also a description of our community when we are at our best.

Every Sunday we pray for each other. Every Sunday when we gather we, each in our own way, lift up our suffering and the sufferings of the world and give them over to God. And, when illness, heartache, or whatever sorrow besets us, we call on our elders, not just our priests, to come sit with us pray with us, anoint us with oil in hopes that the prayer of faith will raise us up.

This image of the community salted with Christ has been especially apparent these past few days. As some of you may know, Father Libby suffered a mild stroke last week following heart surgery. He's now at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore, in good spirits and determined to come home soon. Not a day goes by without someone from St. Anne's visiting, often bringing Kathryn along so she can spend some time with her beloved. There's a visiting schedule circulating on line. And, of course, Dick+ is mentioned in our prayers.

This is one example of how the community salted with Christ acts. There are others, including the nearly 200 bags of groceries collected this month for the Lighthouse.

"The Church," to quote a priest from the Mar Thoma Church, "is the salt in society for God's mission."

Think of that. We are the salt in society for God's mission of reconciliation, healing and restoration. When all else seems to be spinning out of control, reeling from right to left at a dizzying, often disturbing pace, the Church, at its best, continues God's mission to salt the world with Christ. Though the news of the day can elate or depress, sometimes within the same hour, the world's needs remain. And we in the church universal are called to meet those needs through discipleship and servanthood.

Our brother from the Mar Thoma Church goes on to say: "Salt's basic property is to prevent disintegration and to preserve goodness for the future. It is a purifying agent."

"Salt is good," Jesus says in classic understatement. It is essential for life. It can turn a bland plate of food into something delectable. The ancient Hebrews sprinkled salt on their offerings to God, thus signaling that a covenant had been made. Throughout the Mediterranean world a pinch of salt was used to ceremonially seal an agreement.

These are the realities that inform Jesus' use of salt to help his disciples understand some of what they'll need if they are to succeed. He is "salting" them with his teaching. And they need all the help they can get.

Not too long in our gospel story they shared the embarrassment of not being able to cast out the demon that controlled the epileptic boy. "Why couldn't we drive it out?" they asked Jesus, only to be told, "This kind can only come out by prayer." That probably stung the twelve disciples. Here they'd been following

Jesus for months, possibly years, and probably thought they were making some progress. But, no. Their prayer was not up to the task.

Then they got into an argument over who was the greatest. For all we know, Peter might have tried to throw his weight around. But when Jesus caught them at it, no one had anything to say.

Now we find them trying to stop someone who is doing the very thing they could not: Cast out demons in Jesus' name. You have to wonder if the memory of their past failure fueled their resentment and their zeal. "He was not following us," John said, perhaps hoping for affirmation. You can't just have some exorcist going around, tapping into the holy name of Jesus without the proper credentials. Instead of praise, John and the others get a mild rebuke: "Do not stop him. For whoever is not against us is for us."

Now the "salting" begins with a series of teachings at once timely and frightening. Jesus wants to shake us up with these extreme statements. There's a heavy price to pay for destroying the spiritual lives of "one of these little ones who believe in me." A commentator writing on the scandals in the Catholic Church used these same words in a recent column. They are timely and disturbing words.

Then Jesus turns from what we do to others to what we do to ourselves, those habits that make us stumble in our walk of faith. These verses should give us pause because the actions called for are so extreme: Cut off your hand; Cut off your foot; Tear out your eye. Better to enter the Kingdom of God maimed, half-blind and free. One of our great theologians of the early church, Origen of Egypt, took Jesus at his word and took a knife to his body.

But Jesus is only using this extreme language to say sacrifice is needed to enter his father's kingdom. You're going to have to give up something, change something, maybe lose someone. As the old bluesman the Rev. Gary Davis says: "There's a great change since I've been born. Things that I used to do. I don't do no more. People that I used to see. I don't see no more. There's been a great change since I've been born."

This change is the salt that transforms our lives, giving it a taste it didn't have before. And in this new life we find God's gift of peace. That's what the arguing, exclusionary disciples were lacking. Self-interest, not self-sacrifice, was uppermost in their minds. They are not yet the salt of the earth. They do not yet have a church that is the salt in society for God's mission. Be we do. And so, Jesus' words ring true for us. Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another, because you can't be fussing and fighting and driving up 97 to visit an aging priest in need of healing. You can't be arguing over who is the greatest, while making a meal for a family whose beloved matriarch is dying from cancer.

You can't. But if you find yourself stumbling in your walk, take extreme measures. Grab the scalpel of prayer and confession so that you may be healed. Because the prayer of the righteous, and that's who you are, righteous sons and daughters of God, righteous brothers and sisters of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and your prayer, as St. James promises, will be powerful and effective.

So, be at peace with each other and be salted with Christ.

Amen.

The Rev. M. Dion Thompson, delivered on 30 September 2018

