

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21) – Year B – September 27, 2009

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

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Second only to chocolate in my personal top five list of favorite foods are chips. These days, chips come ready-salted in all kinds of flavors. However, I remember when I was a child there was a certain brand of chips that came unsalted, but had a blue paper twist of salt inside the packet so the consumer could salt to taste. They were never my favorite brand, because when I applied the salt myself it was usually too much in one place and not enough in others, with the result that the overall effect was not particularly good. Nonetheless, I still love that saltiness of chips.

In the usual way, today's pericope from Mark's Gospel is linked by the opening and closing sentences, with the expanded teaching sandwiched in between. It is 'ready-salted' if you like, but does require a little work to figure out the connection. John comes to Jesus and says, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." At the close of His teaching Jesus says, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." It may not sound like there's any relationship between the two, but as we will see Jesus' teaching is highly consistent in content, and continues to be interpretative of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Let's get into the salt first. In Greek mythology, salt is considered especially dear to the gods and even divine, perhaps because of its association with some eternal properties. For example, you can dissolve salt in water, and then recover it again. Salt is an important food preservative, and a subtle flavoring often more noticeable by its absence than its presence. We all need some salt in our diet to maintain our bodily electrolytes in good balance. Although like many good things, too much of it can be dangerous. Salt was such a valuable commodity in the ancient world that it was even part of a Roman soldier's pay, giving us the origin of the word salary. Biblically, the Book of Numbers (18:19) describes "an eternal covenant of salt" with God. In Leviticus (2:13) we read, "You shall not omit from your grain offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt." And so we know that salt is intimately connected to offerings that are pleasing to God. Covenants with God that are sealed with salt are also symbols of hospitality, one of the gifts of this community of faith, and a link that extends to modern times in the Russian tradition of bread and salt. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus describes His followers as the salt of the earth, a phrase still used to speak well of someone, and an integral part of our Christian discipleship.

The other slice of bread here is John telling Jesus about the stranger who was casting demons out in Jesus' name. The reason John gives for trying to stop him is that he was not following us. "Them" and "us" is a very dangerous differentiator. There can be many reasons why we like to set ourselves apart, and usually a little higher than the stranger, the other, than them. Jesus cautions us about this behavior in Mark, knowing full well that only one whose heart is faithful to Christ will be able to do a deed of power in His name. We know this explicitly because of another little story that we find in the Acts of the Apostles about Paul's deeds of power, and some who think they can use God's name in vain. This is the story. "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, ... Then some itinerant ... exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, 'I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.' ... But the evil spirit said to them in reply, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?' Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded" (Acts 19:11, 13, 15-16). The principle still applies today. God knows the faithful by their hearts, not by whether they fit our expectations.

Our own "them" and "us" biases sometimes shows up in putting down those who worship Christ in a different way or belong to a different type of church. Even if the basis of our discrimination against a brother or sister in Christ is not about differences in styles of worship, it can certainly be about any number of other distractions, including how we read the Bible, and which translation is authoritative. As the only woman pastor in this area, I am acutely aware of prejudice based on gender. The list could easily go on, but it amounts to the same question we faced last week – who is in, and who is out. I don't want to

be overly simplistic, but the Word charges us to test the Spirits. You and I have the power to discern whether the Holy Spirit is working in anyone who professes the name of Christ. It is relatively straightforward. We just need to look at the fruits of his or her ministry in and to the world, because as Jesus said, whoever is not against us, are for us.

The example from Acts, and the horrific language used as Jesus elucidates His meaning, makes it quite apparent that He has one aim in mind. Here, and later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that God has one requirement of each of us. As we saw in the Gospel of John (6:24-35) earlier in the summer lectionary, the one work that we are called to perform is to "believe in him whom God has sent". Jesus. Since God has called the whole world to faith in Jesus Christ, it is a serious offense against God's plan of salvation for the world to impede, crush, destroy or otherwise make one of the little ones falter in their faith in Christ. The intensity of the hyperbolic language that Jesus uses is part of His own Jewish tradition, and it amplifies the seriousness with which God views this issue. It is particularly noteworthy that Jesus chooses as examples of stumbling blocks the hand, the foot, and the eye. These are all part and parcel of our fleshliness - what our flesh touches, the places we go to, and what we see. We are undoubtedly bodily creatures, but that sense of self is what gets us into trouble. When we begin to trust in our own senses and experiences, rather than centering our self in God and trusting in Christ Jesus our Lord as our guide along the way, we are in serious danger of becoming subjects of our own prejudices. God is always looking at our hearts, not outward appearances. It is a point made throughout Scripture, and even in God's own Son -- the suffering servant -- who is described as having, "no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 52:3). Ultimately, there is only one rightful judge of everything and everyone in this world, and the good news is that it isn't me or you!

We still have not quite connected the gracious hospitality that we should show to all believers, and being salty. As mentioned earlier, Jesus worked hard to correct the faulty interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures that had led the people astray. Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem and has been describing His own passion to the disciples. It seems more than likely that the salting of sacrifices to make them acceptable to God, applies in two important ways. Firstly, Jesus is **the** salt that made His own sacrifice for the life of the world acceptable to God as the seal of the new covenant. Knowing what was about to happen in Jerusalem, Jesus exhorts the disciples to have salt in themselves. In other words to believe in Him, by God's grace. Secondly, our faith in Christ makes us salty too, which means that we are called to season the world with the salt of Christ. In deep gratitude for all that Christ has done for us, we too must present our bodies to God in service as a living sacrifice. There is even more good news today. Since, we are so to speak, ready-salted by God through faith in Christ Jesus, our service in Christ's name is not hit and miss, it is intentional and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Nor do you and I have to rely on self to go out and salt the world. We simply have to put our faith and trust in the Lord Jesus to lead us in all goodness and in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Amen.