

Salty Saints? – FCUCC
Sept. 27. 2015
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Opening:

Before he left for his trip to Germany, Gary called and invited me to preach this morning and I was happy to do so. Then he told me the Gospel text... oh the surprises of the lectionary!!

With Mark 9:38-50 I get the passage with millstones, hell and unquenchable fires and the admonitions to cut off a hand or foot or tear out an eye if they become stumbling blocks... thanks, Gary! Well, I do like a challenging passage – and this definitely seems to be one.

On this day of dedication for our deacons and welcoming new members, I hope we may all find some edifying and challenging message from this passage.

Prayer....

I.

The text begins with the apostle John eager to claim credit for halting someone who had been casting out demons and healing in Jesus' name. This follows an incident when Jesus' followers had been arguing about who is the greatest. Jesus brought forth a little child to illustrate his upside down way of thinking about greatness and power

According to Mark, the disciples misunderstanding of power at that time seems to be rather like our pastors and deacons saying... "we've got leadership, compassion and justice under control for FCUCC... the rest of you don't need to do anything... you may even be getting in the way!" That's certainly not how power is seen here!

Jesus is not talking about some kind of exclusive authority or entitlement. He is much more concerned with the power of healing and hospitality for good, than the controls and limitations of power against evil.

In the book "Say to the Mountain", by Ched Myers, I have found a helpful commentary on today's scripture passage. Myers says that Jesus' response to John reminds us that the church "does not have any exclusive franchise over the practice of justice and compassion... The church is not some power base for it's members, but a community continually concerned about redistributing power to the excluded."

Yet it is not always so easy to share power or remember that the work of following Jesus is greater than what any one congregation may do. I recall an

incident from my pastoral years that reminded me of that...A troubled women started coming to the church where I was pastor in Kensington, Md. Slowly she began to trust me with stories about the husband who had abused her in the past and she started to find help and healing through the ministries of our congregation. One day we were talking about those TV and radio preachers whose patriarchal messages of submission I believed were damaging to women. But she stopped me as she said..." in those years when my husband was so controlling and would not let me out to go anywhere... that was all I had. All I had to hold onto were those words of encouragement I was able to hear from those TV and radio preachers.

Her message to me was that I didn't have the franchise over care and compassion either. "No one who does a deed of power in Jesus name will be able to speak evil of him afterward".... We all have something to learn about how goodness and justice and healing can happen...especially in unexpected ways

When Jesus tells his disciples... "whoever gives you a cup of water to drink... will by no means lose the reward", I hear him saying that we all have basic needs and hurts. ...even those who are always helping others need help sometime too. As the current Pope so aptly shows in his life and message, remembering that we are both recipients and givers of care and compassion is the real source of the Church's power.

II.

But now we come to this even stranger and troubling part of the text...Woe is you if you cause another... a "little one", to stumble. Woe is you if your hand or foot or eye is a stumbling block for you...amputate that troublesome part. Thankfully this is one of the passages few people understand literally!

It appears that Mark seems to be combining the Pauline metaphor of the community as a "body" (as described in I Cor. 12) with the principle in Romans 14 of not causing the "weaker member" to stumble.... As members of the body of Christ we are connected and accountable to each other. Today new members pledged themselves to be a part of this congregation. This body will be changing and growing, hurting and living, in new ways. Remember what they, and all of us, commit ourselves to do and be as members of this FCUCC body and the wider church.

But let us also consider what might hinder us in carrying out these promises we make before God and each other. What makes us stumbling blocks to others and to ourselves?

Once again I turned to Ched Myers for some contemporary insight into this strange passage. He says:

“Think of the modern analogy of the struggle against addiction. The process of recovery often feels like part of oneself (the addicted, co-dependent part) is being amputated.”

Or as Gerald May writes in “Addiction and Grace”... “any struggle with addiction involves deprivation... every false prop is vulnerable to relinquishment”.

Such “amputation” is life-saving surgery on the cancer of our illusions and appetites.”

I suspect my friends in Pa. would have gladly given an arm, or foot or eye if they could have found a way to save their 21 year old daughter from the cocaine overdose that took her life last year.

I am grateful for the support groups that meet here in our building and for the open and honest ways our congregation tries to confront and not deny the hurts, addictions and injustices in our congregation and community. Perhaps this troublesome passage is a reminder that we still need bold actions, strong stances and clearer vision to confront the individual and social addictions that are stumbling blocks for so many parts of Christ's body.

Again quoting Myers, and remembering what Jesus told his disciples about power... “According to Mark, our greatest individual and social addiction is the will to dominate. Disciples are called to defect from what society may see as natural, such as the ways ‘little ones’ are routinely victimized by patterns of hierarchy and exclusion... These strange sayings then are arguing that is better to be deformed than to conform to what oppresses more vulnerable members of the Body”.

In Jesus' day, the commonly held belief was that anyone with any sort of deformity or illness was to be prohibited from entering the Temple to worship. Could this passage also be turning that prohibition upside down? These strange words are saying that our weaknesses and deformities are not to be denied, hidden or minimized... we are imperfect humans. But it is the weak, the excluded, the sick, or deformed who recognize our need to be healed, that Jesus calls forward. They...We become the Church... the witnesses of transformation, healing and wholeness from the inside out.

This connects with the other text for today from James 5 that tells us when we are sick or suffering to call on one another for prayer and anointing. One of the often practiced ordinances in my Church of the Brethren ministry was anointing for healing. Those times when members of the church called for the clergy and deacons and trusted loved ones to anoint them, when their sins or stumbling blocks to a faithful life were confessed, and when we all prayed together were some of the most meaningful times of true worship I have ever experienced.

Those were times I often felt what I would identify as the fire and power of the Holy Spirit.

Or the times when parts of this Body of believers connect with those who come to Pritchard park on Sundays and share food on other days, go to the hospitals and are visited there, stand by those who are facing prison, help a child learn to read, provide rooms and care for those needing shelter, or take time to call, write, visit...those are also times when the power and effectiveness of prayer and healing is made known among us and within us.

I certainly don't believe the church is to be preaching some message of fear about hell, or proclaiming some eternal fire of damnation. Instead in this world of great suffering, exclusion, violence and institutionalized inequality... we are to embrace the "fire" of prayer, anointing and recovery. That is how we help one another not linger or get lost in the daily "hells" of addiction, guilt, self-loathing, and isolation that unfortunately causes so many of us to stumble.

Conclusion:

Maybe that is why this passage concludes with a word about salt...."have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" it says.

Have you ever gotten salt into a wound? It hurts! It burns like fire!
But that is also a sign of the salt's cleansing, healing, preserving properties.

Perhaps we might see ourselves as a "Society of Salty Saints"?...That's the way Michael Elliott describes his broken, poor, diverse, honest and struggling inner city congregation in a book of that title. What does being "salt" in a world that needs healing, cleansing and peace look and feel like?

Maybe it's not being in denial about our addictions and our shared need for support, transformation, healing and health...

Perhaps it means amputating some of the middle class comforts and sense of entitlement, that cause us to be stumbling blocks for others and ourselves...

Or just maybe it means being less concerned about controlling and conforming and more focused on being compassionate and courageous.

This strange and troublesome passage gives us a lot to ponder, Salty Saints... how are we to have "salt within ourselves... and be whole and at peace with one another"?