

How can you make salt salty again?" (Mark 9:38-50)

This morning we continue our sermon series entitled "Jesus has Questions for You". About halfway through his Gospel, Mark tells the story of the disciples walking with Jesus as he gets ever closer to his death on the cross. With a series of questions, Jesus is trying to help them understand the kind of Messiah he has come to be—a messiah who came to serve, to suffer, to die and to rise from the dead. And if he is a suffering Messiah, what will it look like for the disciples to follow him? We have also seen that the same questions Jesus posed to his disciples still challenge us today. This morning's passage is a bit tricky, but as we read through the passage, I think we will hear the voice of Jesus calling to us by his holy spirit. So here is the plan: We are going to read through the passage, reviewing as we go three key characteristics Jesus is looking for in his disciples. With those characteristics as background, we will tackle our main question for today: "How can you make salt salty again?"

We pick up immediately after Pastor Jeremy's sermon from last week. Jesus is probably still at a house in the small fishing village of Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. As Jeremy mentioned, Jesus had pulled his core group of twelve disciples aside so he could dedicate some time to them free from distractions. With this as background, we pick up the narrative starting with Mark chapter nine verses thirty-eight to forty. I will be reading today from the New International Version:

³⁸ "Teacher," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

³⁹ "Do not stop him," Jesus said. "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. **(Mark 9:38-40)**

It looks like the disciples had gone off on their own again. Seeing someone ministering in Jesus' name, they had stopped him. Why? Because he wasn't one of their inner crowd. Now John, probably the youngest of the disciples, looks to Jesus for approval of what they had done. It seems the disciples would rather people continue to suffer oppression by demons than be set free by the "wrong" people. But Jesus turns this idea on its head: if God chooses to do mighty things through someone who doesn't belong to their little circle, who are the disciples to get in

the way? There is a kind of “exclusiveness” to John’s language, but exclusiveness and division are not the Jesus way. So here we have our first question of the day:

I. “Do we cultivate unity?”

We all have a natural tendency to organize each other into groups we like to call “us” and “them”. We try to protect ourselves by surrounding ourselves with people who are enough like us that we feel safe and comfortable. John wasn’t expressing something unusual—we know the tendency to divide also crept its way into the early church. For example, Paul chastises the church in Corinth for dividing their loyalty among various people: “one of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’” Paul’s response: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? **(1 Cor 1:12-13)**. The Corinthian church wasn’t the only one struggling with issues of unity. To the church in Ephesus, Paul describes how Jesus broke down the walls that separated Jews from non-Jews: “He is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” **(Eph 2:14-16)** and to the church in Galatia, Paul spoke not only against racial division but also against socio-economic and gender divisions: “²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” **(Gal 3:28)**

Two thousand years later, the question still comes down to us: Are we guarding the unity of the church? It is easy in a church like Cornerstone, which enjoys a very high level of unity and fellowship, to take our unity for granted. But I would still challenge you today to consider yourself a steward of that unity: a custodian who is responsible for doing your bit to guard the unity of the church.

After rebuking John for trying to sow division, Jesus continues by reminding the disciples that they need to serve one another—even in the little things. We pick it up with verse 41:

Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward. **(Mark 9:41)**

In this example, Jesus reminds the disciples that they should not be too proud, too busy, too pre-occupied or too anything else to offer one another a glass of water in Jesus' name. So we reach our second point:

II. "Do we serve one another?"

But Jesus doesn't stop with underlining the value of simple acts of service; he goes on to use hyperbole—exaggerating his language to really drive home the point with these words of caution in verse 42:

"If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:42)

Our focus today is on what kind of people Jesus is calling us to be. We should be people who try to keep our fellow believers from stumbling, from falling. Given the intensity of Jesus warning—that we would be better off trying to swim with a huge millstone strapped to our neck than causing someone to stumble, we can be sure he is talking about saving each other from falling into sin and death. Do we have hearts that are trying to help one another—to protect one another when we see danger ahead? Do we look around to see if someone is stumbling on the way and needs a hand up? Are we people who protect and guard one another, or are we a people indifferent to one another's struggles? And now we come to our third point:

III. "Do we practice sacrificial devotion?"

Jesus continues to use the language of hyperbole when he describes three choices his disciples might face if they want to belong to God's kingdom. Verse 43:

⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where

“the worms that eat them do not die,
and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:43-48¹)

Wow! That’s strong language! It’s better to lose a hand, an eye, or a foot than to lose the opportunity to enter the kingdom of God? And the alternative to the kingdom is Hell. We don’t need to go into detail about what the bible means when it talks about Hell and the coming judgement, beyond to say that one day, Jesus will return and sit on a throne of judgement with all of humanity standing before him. Some he will welcome with open arms and others he will turn away. We can never understand Jesus words without considering the rest of the Bible—even the rest of Mark². For example, does Jesus *literally* mean that we should lop off our arms if they cause us to sin? I would answer that with another question: Do we think that Jesus, who in the previous chapters of Mark has healed the blind, the lame, and a man with a crippled hand, really wants us to become blind or lame or crippled to somehow buy our way into the kingdom? It can’t be. Jesus is trying to get the attention of his listeners. It is like saying “this is serious. Hear me out here. You have choices to make, choices with consequences so vast you probably can’t imagine”. It isn’t about hands and feet and eyes; it’s about hearts and mind that are sacrificially devoted to Jesus, which points us straight back to the sermon Steve preached two weeks ago on what would we give in return for our soul. Jesus is challenging us again to not let anything come between us and him.

So, we are called to be united, to serve one another, and to sacrifice. But what about the salt? We kind of raced through the first few verses, but now it’s time to slow down and focus. Are you ready to talk salt? Here we go. Mark nine, verses 49 and 50:

¹ Older translations repeat verse 48 after verses 43 and verse 45, but the best modern scholarship believes that those repetitions were the result of manual copying errors hundreds of years ago, so have removed verses 44 and 46.

² To hone your skills at interpreting the Bible, I highly recommend *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Written by noted Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart and New Testament scholar Gordon Fee, it is now in its fourth edition : https://www.amazon.ca/How-Read-Bible-All-Worth/dp/0310517826/ref=mp_s_a_1_1?dchild=1&hasWorkingJavascript=1&keywords=reading+the+bible+for+al+its+worth&qid=1615649347&srefix=Reading+the+Bible&sr=8-1

⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.” **(Mark 9:49-50)**

How Can Salt Lose its Saltiness?

What on earth is Jesus talking about? Let’s start by digging into the first half of verse 50, “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?” When we read something in the Bible, our first job is to understand its historical context. We know this, but I have to admit, this passage had me scratching my head for a very long time. How is salt supposed to lose its saltiness? It’s salt—there is no such thing as salt that isn’t salty. But my confusion here is very much a reflection of my modern understanding of salt. You see, growing up, I knew salt as something we bought at a grocery store—In a white cardboard box about this size with blue and gold polka dots all around the bottom. And every single time I opened the little spout and poured, I knew exactly what to expect: free running iodized table salt! How many times did I read those words on the box? The idea that somehow it could become unsalty is just, well, inconceivable.

But that cardboard box is not what the people of Jesus’ day thought of when he talked about salt. For common people in first century Israel, the easiest way to get salt was from the Salt Sea, which today we call the Dead Sea. You take salty water out of the Sea and let it evaporate, leaving behind whatever had been suspended in the water—which was mostly salt. You could try to filter it, but it still wasn’t pure—it was mixed with other minerals and probably a little dirt and sand. And what happens over time if you leave something that is mostly salt in a porous stone or pottery container such as a stone or pottery container? As time passes, moisture will get it and start to leach the salt into the walls of the container, eventually leaving nothing in it but a tasteless mess of other minerals, dirt and sand. “What good is that?” Jesus asks. It is of no use whatsoever. How do you make it salty again? You don’t, it is worthless—suitable only for throwing out in the street to be trampled underfoot.

What's All this about Salt?

But why was Jesus even talking about salt? For this, we start by looking at how the Bible talks about salt. Turns out the uses of salt are extremely varied, which means it could stand as a metaphor for an equally varied range of meanings. For thousands of years salt was the main preservative to keep food from spoiling, so it became a symbol both of permanence and of fellowship around a table of food. For the Jews, it was required in the grain, incense, and meat sacrifices in the temple, so it is often a symbol of the covenant—of right relationship between God and his people. It was well known to the people of Jesus' day that when you live in a windy hot and arid climate, you need to replace the salt in your system, so salt is sometimes a symbol of life. But salt could be destructive—when a city was conquered, sometimes the conqueror would “salt” it, damaging the soil so that nothing would grow there—so salt can be a symbol of destruction. But we have already reached the uncomfortable place where we have too many options in front of us. How do we know which of these meanings is the “right one” for our passage?

When the meaning of a passage is uncertain, we start with what we *can* be certain of—both inside the verse, and in the verses around it. So let's think about salt for a moment. What's the one fact that we cannot deny about salt? The fact that salt *is* salty. Whether that saltiness is allowing it to season food so it tastes better, or whether it is preserving food so it doesn't spoil, or it is being sprinkled in an offering to symbolize the permanent covenant relationship between God and his children, it is *only* able to do its job simply because it is being itself. It is being salt. So if Jesus is warning the disciples about anything here (and he certainly is), he is warning them that they must stay true to being who God has called them to be. We all know what salty salt is like. But what does a salty disciple look like? I would suggest Jesus has just described salty disciples for us in the last ten verses: a disciple of Jesus does not seek to divide, but to unify; a disciple serves and protects from sin, and a disciple is willing to sacrifice for the sake of Kingdom mission.

It's important to note here that we are reading Mark's Gospel, so we need to pay careful attention to the nuances of what he records. I'd like to draw your attention to how Jesus describes the people in each of the previous verses: there is the man who served Jesus by

casting out demons in Jesus' name; there are those who offer cups of water "in Jesus Name" and who are they offering it to? those who "belong to the Messiah", the little ones we are to protect from sin are called those "who believe in Jesus", and as disciples we are called to sacrifice as members of the kingdom of God. What do all these descriptions have in common—they all describe followers of Jesus. Jesus is talking to his small band of followers and calling them to take care of one another. So I would suggest to you the overarching theme of this passage is the theme of unity—we do not divide each other into "us" and "them"; we serve one another; we protect one another from sin; we sacrifice whatever we need to for the sake (I would suggest) of our fellow believers. What is salt to us then? I would cautiously suggest that Mark is talking about the salt of fellowship--the salt that joins us at the supper table, that binds us together as one body called by Jesus to live out his calling together.

Salted with Fire?

All that remains is one tricky little verse "For everyone will be salted with fire" (Mark 9:49). Righhhht. I should mention that fire has a rather narrow usage in the Bible: it most often speaks of the presence of God, of sacrifice, of destruction, of purification, and of persecution. Fire in the Bible is not a friendly crackling source of warmth on a winter day. It is more like the intense fire of a furnace hot enough to purge impurities from precious metals. So what do we make of this phrase "salted by fire"? The experts are not united in their interpretation of this verse, but I believe that Jesus must still be talking to the disciples about unity. And if he is talking to the disciples, he would not be talking about punishment—he has already warned them against the fires of hell. No, he is warning them that they will face the fires of persecution, and that when it comes, it must pull them together in fellowship and common purpose, not drive them apart. At the same time, he is also talking about the fires of sacrifice—even as they face persecution, the disciples sacrificially offer their lives to God. I freely admit that I might be wrong in this interpretation, but I think it fits the context. The question for us as a Cornerstone family: when the pressure rises, do we band together sacrificially, or does the pressure drive us apart and distract us from our mission?

In Canada the church is blessed to live without the persecution it knows in other part of the world. Still, it hasn't been a super excellent year, and I wonder if we can draw some inspiration from this passage. To be honest, I look forward to a day when we can go a day, or even a week, without thinking about Covid-19. But we aren't there yet. As a society, as individuals, and as a church we have been stretched sometimes close to our breaking point as we struggle to overcome our common microscopic enemy. I am so proud to belong to a church like Cornerstone that rose to the challenge of being the body of Christ last year in new ways that we never expected or planned for. I will probably never forget how quickly basically every ministry of the church went from an in-person model to an online, physically distanced model: Kevin and his team with the High School kids, Kerri and her team with the younger kids and her weekly tools to help parents help their kids, the worship team with their weekly cycle of recordings, sometimes made in individual houses and spliced together into something that can bind us together on Sunday mornings, Anna and the gang in the office, small groups learning to meet by video conference with the help of Pastor Jeremy and his army of small group leaders, new on-line production ministries, a burgeoning outreach ministry helping so many through dark days, and a new leadership team for our prayer ministry. Our facilities, food and camp ministries took big hits but remained faithful through it all. Countless others serve in ways I may never be able to see. And behind it all, the quiet, confident, prayerful, thoughtful, mature, spirit led leadership of Andrew, Dorothy and Steve.

What kind of people are we? What does it mean for us to be salty and to not lose our saltiness? We are a people united around a common vision to serve and protect one another, and to sacrifice whatever we must in order to live out the kingdom vision God has planted in our hearts. What might that look like? It will be different for each one of us, but let me leave you with three challenges today. The first is easy: **let someone in the church know that you are thankful** for them. Maybe one of the pastors, or a small group leader or a teacher or a staff member or a volunteer who has done something you appreciate. It shouldn't take you long to think of someone, but way too often we talk ourselves out of showing our appreciation because we think people will think it silly, or we are too busy, or we think it doesn't matter. The second is a little harder: when a **critical thought comes into your mind about someone in the church,**

instead of letting it take root, would you vanquish it by saying a prayer for that person—preferably a prayer that starts with thanksgiving for them. And the third? **Will you pray for the strength and unity of the church?** We are all tired of this, and I would venture to suggest that even (or perhaps especially) the pastors, staff, and lay leaders of the church may be feeling that exhaustion. Will you pray that God will protect the precious lighthouse that is Cornerstone?

May God bless each of us in his family as we commit ourselves to guarding the unity of the church, to serving one another, and to devoting ourselves sacrificially for the sake of His kingdom. And may we be salt that never loses its saltiness.