

“Some Do’s and Don’ts of Discipleship”

Mark 9:38-40; Proper 21, Sept 27, 2015

Once upon a time, long ago, there was a king living in a faraway land. One morning, when the king’s three beautiful daughters all came to the breakfast table, he ask each one individually: **“How much do you love me?”**

The oldest daughter replied, “Father, I love you more than all the **gold** in the world!” And the king smiled from ear to ear. The middle-aged daughter replied, “Father, I love you more than all the **silver** in the world!” And the king once again smiled from ear to ear. But when his youngest daughter answered the king by saying: “Father, I love you more than all the **salt** in the world!” the king frowned and was displeased with her answer. What in the world could she possibly mean?

Fortunately the cook, who overheard the whole conversation, understood exactly the point that the king’s youngest daughter was hoping to make. So the next morning he decided to serve up one of the king’s favorite dishes: Eggs Benedict. But in preparing that meal, the cook purposefully left out all of the salt that his recipe called for! When the king took the first bite of his Eggs Benedict, the **food tasted so insipid to the king’s taste buds that the king refused to eat it.**

Though, on the one hand, breakfast was a disaster, on the other hand, the king now clearly understood the message that his youngest daughter was hoping to communicate! She was saying that her life in this world, without her father in it, just wouldn’t be any good!

Two of the highest compliments that Jesus ever gives to us as his called disciples in this world are words that are found in his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, where he says: *“You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its saltiness, what good it is? It is good for nothing except to be trampled under the feet of men!”*

You are the light of the world. No one takes a lamp and places it under a bushel basket it, but sets it up high upon a lampstand that it might give light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light so shine before others, that seeing your good works they may glorify the Father in heaven because of you!” (Matthew 5:13-16).

In our Gospel lesson this morning Jesus is sharing with us once again some “do’s” and “don’ts” of our discipleship. Here Jesus is telling us that the last thing any of us should ever want to do as his disciples is to make our way **totally roughshod through life; sinning carelessly and thoughtlessly ourselves; without ever taking out some much needed time for self-reflection and self-introspection. Tragically enough, if this were to become our approach to life, we would be constantly influencing other people, and other believers, to become partners with us in our sin too.**

So what are some of these “do’s” and “don’ts” in our discipleship?

1. First of all, Jesus says have salt in yourselves!

When we look back to that first century world it is practically impossible for us to overestimate the important part that salt played in people’s lives back then!

Yes, salt was used for flavoring food, but much more importantly, some 1700 years before electricity would even be discovered and another 150 years before the whole art of refrigeration would be developed, salt was used primarily to preserve

various food products; not only meats but also grains and other plant-based foods and the like.

So when Jesus calls us to be the “salt” of the earth, yes he is suggesting that we should flavor the world, hopefully for good in a much more positive way, but he is also calling upon every one of us to do our best to prevent our world from constantly deteriorating more and more into an ever-more miserable state of moral corruption and spiritual degeneration.

Yes, salt may have been used on food for flavoring and preservative purposes back then too, but sometimes the word “salt” was used symbolically and became the verbal equivalent of such words as: **wisdom, generosity and wit**; Perhaps, this is much of what St. Paul may have had in mind when he wrote to the Colossians one day saying: **“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, that you may know how to answer everyone!” (Colossians 4:5)**

In **Ezekiel 4:14**, we learn that salt was sometimes used as **“currency” or as “money”** in the ancient world. That’s how we got that old saying: **“You are worth your weight in salt!”**

Today, however, when **salt (or sodium chloride) is harvested**, it is purified professionally, removing all the impurities completely from it. So theoretically you could purchase a box of salt down here at **Kroger today if you were 20 years old and place it in your kitchen cabinet and take it out some 50 years later when you are 70 years old and it would still be salt. It may be in a chunk, but it would still be salt.**

In **Jesus’ day, however, salt was harvested from the surface of salt marshes or pits where salt water had flowed from the Mediterranean or the Dead Sea. Therefore, Mediterranean Sea salt had mineral impurities gathered up along with it, plus other impurities from the rocks it may have been scraped off of, and even more impurities like algae, sand or sea life that flowed in with the seawater.** This is the reason that salt, when it was acquired by human being in our Lord’s Day, could without a doubt become contaminated and therefore deemed as never to be never useful again.

What Jesus is saying is that through a willful neglect of our own sanctification our **witness to him and to his Gospel can become greatly compromised!** Do you remember that old saying: **“You may be the only Bible that the unbelieving world, ever reads!”**

Salt had many uses in Hebrew worship. The grain offering, burnt offering, and incense all had to be salted. As a sign of fidelity and friendship, salt was used to ratify covenants, including God’s covenants with his people in the Old Testament.

Salt purifies, cleanses and preserves from corruption, and so Jesus calls upon his disciples to live out their lives as agents of purification in this world!

When Jesus tells us: **“Have salt in yourselves”** I believe that he is **telling us to always be ready and willing to receive the fresh outpourings of the Holy Spirit upon us! Jesus is telling us to not only hear his Word but to believe his Word.** And above, he is speaking about that **“more abundant life”** that he came and still comes today to bring us by his resurrection power (John 10:1). To have salt in yourselves is to **experience God’s love firsthand and to know your sins are all forgiven fully for Christ’s sake.** To have salt in yourselves is to **know and believe that he was put to death for our transgressions, but raised again for our justification (Romans 4:25).**

To “*have salt in your selves*” is to heed the words of St. James in our epistle lesson today! It is to become engaged in all of the spiritual disciplines, God now old outs to us in Jesus’ name!

“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray! Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power in its working!”

Even though Jesus cautions us against ever doing anything that might damage one of his “little ones,” meaning children, but also meaning, any Christians who are new to the faith, he also knows full well as sinners that we all have probably done it, in some way, to some degree from time to time; some much more severely than others!

Yes, before we would commit such a sin it would be better for us to tie a millstone around our necks and drown ourselves in the sea, when we think of the pain that might not only come to that other person, but also to ourselves because of our disobedience! **But aren’t we glad that the Holy Son of God went to Calvary’s cross to bring us totally complete and full forgiveness for these sins as well?** You remember what Jesus says back in Mark 3:28-29, “*Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin*” —for all of Jesus’ opponents there that day said our Lord that he had an evil spirit.

2. Secondly, Jesus says: “Be at peace with one another!” (v. 50)!

And our initial reaction may be, “**No problem Lord! We can do it!**” Or “**Why not?**”

But if only it were that easy!?! **And don’t you feel just a little bit of sorrow and empathy for poor old Pastor Moses in our Old Testament lesson today?**

Though at great peril to himself he answered God’s call to become the man who would challenge the Pharaoh of Egypt to turn lose all the Hebrew slaves he presently had had at his disposal for 400 years now, and even after their release was eventually granted following those long series of **Ten Plagues**—the **Israelites are all pictured here as all being immensely busy groaning again!**

God’s anger is smoldering and Moses feels caught in the middle. The only solution he sees is for God to put him to death on the spot according to **Numbers 11:15** in our Old Testament lesson today, where Moses calls out to God: “***If you are going to treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight that I may not see my wretchedness!***”

Perhaps one reason that we don’t have more peace in our lives is because we are all so determined to guard our own turf, and Jesus even encountered this among his disciples. One day as they are walking around the area of Capernaum, John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, comes up to his Master and gives a report. “**Teacher,**” he says, “***we were out among the people and we saw a man who is not one of us. He was driving out demons and he was doing this in your name. Now we know that he has not been trained like we have. He has not been chosen as we have so we told him to stop***” (V. 38)!

And it is obvious that Jesus’ disciples expected to be congratulated by our Lord because of what they had done! “**Good for you, guys!**” they expected Jesus to say to

them. **How little Jesus' first twelve disciples understood where Jesus' teachings would soon take them.**

They were the chosen people, the Jews, but soon the doors of Judaism would be open to the world! Moses saved the Jews, but Jesus would soon save the world. The temple in Jerusalem was the house of God, but the Church around the world would soon become the house of the Spirit of the Lord. Israel was God's nation but those borders would soon be gone and a new Holy Nation without borders would be established. History would soon replace the high priest in the Holy of Holies, with great High Priest, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has passed into heavens and entered the very inner sanctum in the fullness of the Godhead once again!

The disciples wanted to protect their turf, maintain control, but Jesus had a better way! They were all to **become facilitators, not manipulators of a new kingdom.** If others come along with gifts and talents, Jesus is saying to you and me that we are not to hinder them! In Jesus's own words: *"Whoever is not against us is for us" (v. 40)!*

Here is an interesting statistic. The Society of International Law in London, a few years back, did a thorough study of world history and became convinced that in the last 3,550 years of recorded history there have been only 268 years of what they believed to be worldwide peace. This means that since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world has been at peace less than eight percent of the time! What is even more interesting is that during this time in excess of 8000 peace treaties were made—and broken. My friends, this represents a lot of turf wars!

How can we truly be at peace with one another? Certainly Paul words are helpful that we find in the 5th chapter of Romans: ***"Therefore since we are justified by faith we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now gained access into this grace in which we now stand. Moreover, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produce endurance, endurance produce hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been shed abroad in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit!" (Romans 5:1-15)***

When you take a first glance at the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson today, it may seem to us that Jesus is covering several unrelated topics. (1) There is the disciples' concern about the man whom they do not know driving out demons. Jesus addresses those concerns. (2) Then Jesus instructs them not to cause "little ones" to sin, and here Jesus' use of the phrase little ones means not only children who are young in age, but also new converts to the Christian faith who may be 50 years old! (3) Jesus tells his disciples to cut off their hand if it causes them to sin; for it would be better to be crippled in this life than thrown into hell in the next. (4) Finally a fourth idea is presented: salt. Be like salt Jesus says, be at peace with one another!

These ideas may all seem thrown together haphazardly when we look at them initially; four sayings of Jesus cobbled together by St. Mark, unrelated to one another. But upon a closer look at our Gospel lesson today—there really is a relationship between these four images that Jesus presents to us. The relationship is found in the very last verse of chapter nine, in our Lord's command to be at peace with one another.

Have salt Jesus says. Be like salt. Help preserve what is best in my name. If others are working for the kingdom, don't stop them. Jesus is saying, "Don't fight turf wars in my name!" But always remember that those who follow me are weak; especially the children, the defenseless people in this world and the poor. Do your best to protect them. And don't let sin run rampantly among the members of your body. Be salt. Preserve what is good by being at peace! Peace! Peace between God and man and peace between one another!

3. Thirdly, don't become a stumbling block by damaging the faith of others.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin..." (v. 42)
The Greek verb here is scandalize, to scandalize, scandal, stumbling block.

A father shares a personal experience he had with his family. The weather had been unseasonably warm for the month of January, one winter, in New Jersey. The "spring-like," much-warmer-than usual weather had my boys enjoying the outdoors in ways not normal for winter!

The man said, "I came home from work one night and parked my truck out in the driveway, jumped out, and began to head towards the house. The next thing I knew I was laying on the asphalt of my driveway writhing in pain. One of my sons had left his skateboard right in the middle of the driveway, and it caused me to trip!

At first, I lay there a few moments, trying to regain my composure, grateful that no bones in my body seemed broken. Then I got up, dusted myself off, and walked into the house to find my darling wife and sons sitting in the kitchen and talking.

I said "hello" and mentioned something about how nice the weather had been all day.

Everyone agreed, and then, the truth came out. Rob said, "It was so nice today that I even skated on my skateboard!"

That's when the father said, "Rob, I want to thank you for the reminder today of what it feels like to fall off a skateboard."

When the son asked his dad what he meant, his father proceeded to show him the tear in his new pair of jeans and the gash in his leg.

"What happened?" he asked.

I told him that he left his skateboard in the middle of the driveway and I had stumbled over it and fell! Immediately, his son Rob apologized and did his best to convince his dad he never meant to leave it in the driveway, but his careless attitude unfortunately got the best of him, and his dad ended up being the result of that.

Rob's skateboard was a stumbling block for his father. In the New Testament the word for stumbling block is the one from which we get our English word "scandal!" It is found only in the New Testament, and is never used by any of the classical Greek authors. Literally, it means "a trap". It originally referred to the "trigger of a trap on which the bait is placed!" When the bait is touched by the intended victim, the trap springs and closes around the animal causing its entrapment!" It was similar in design to our mousetraps, but much larger in its size. A stumbling block is a trap for weaker Christians, it is anything that would lead a Christian brother or sister to stray into sin or cause that person to fall away from the truth.

But the New Testament tells us that sadly enough the cross itself can become a stumbling block for people too, when they falsely imagine that there is no way that their sin could ever be that great that it could separate them from the Heavenly Father eternally without the Savior's shed blood. Paul tells the Corinthians: "The word of the cross is a stumbling block for Jesus, and foolishness for Greeks!" Brothers and sister, don't let the cross ever become a stumbling block for you! Amen