

“Season Your Life With Love”

It is something that I believe is easy for many of us to take for granted. At many restaurants, and in most of our homes, it sits waiting for us in a little shaker on the table. Salt. A little bit can change the food that you eat or the baked goods that you make. It is available in fine or coarse crystals and actually in different colors as well. I recall a conversation I had with someone in the hospital. He wasn't taking salt for granted. In fact, he was sharing with me how disappointed he was that he didn't have salt to add to his food, which, like the stereotype for hospitals, wasn't very good without it. If he could just sprinkle a little salt on his food, he was confident it would be much better. He realized what he was missing when it was taken away from him.

You know, salt has not always been taken for granted like this. Salt at other times in history has been quite important and even a relatively expensive commodity. Our word *salary* actually comes from the Latin word for salt and gets its meaning from the salt rations or salt money that Roman soldiers used to receive for their service. Salt was used, like today, to add seasoning and flavor, but it was also used to preserve food at times before there were refrigerators to assist with that.

Jesus alludes to these useful properties of salt when in other places he calls his disciples **“the salt of the earth”** (Matthew 5:13) and here in our sermon text when he encourages them to **“have salt in [themselves].”** Followers of Jesus are to properly flavor the world that they live in with their good deeds of love and service. They are to preserve the world in the sense of not allowing it to be overcome with evil. And they are also to be preserved in their own faith and to assist others in their faith.

Of course, having salt in one's self does not come naturally. If you recall last week's Gospel, you remember how Jesus' disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest. At that point, Jesus explained that the greatest of all was to be the servant of all. He encouraged them not to be so selfish, but to serve even the little children.

Our text follows right after that event. With Jesus' words still ringing in their ears, the disciples brought a new question to Jesus. John in particular speaks up. They had seen someone driving out demons in the name of Jesus. They were concerned that this wasn't proper. He wasn't one of them, one of the twelve. They told him to stop. They figured Jesus would be proud that they had stood up for him in this way. But he wasn't. Jesus explained to them that the man was bringing glory to Jesus' name. He couldn't do powerful miracles in the name of Jesus without trusting in him and relying on him. He wouldn't go on to say anything against his Savior. Jesus says that anyone who is not against him is for him. There are only two options, two possibilities. There is no middle ground.

The problem was still with John and the other disciples. They were concerned with their official standing as Jesus' disciples. They were jealous of someone else's success and work. They took a sinful pride in their own standing and were still trying to be the greatest.

Jesus brought their attention back to the full picture. They didn't need to stand against someone who was working in the name of Jesus. They needed to realize that there were plenty of followers of Jesus who weren't just the twelve. How easy it is for us, like the disciples, to be jealous of others, or to be suspicious of the things that they do. Sometimes we show it in the way we speak about other churches. There are good and proper reasons that we remain separate from other churches and church bodies, but that should never be an excuse to forget about the truth that we confess: that there is one Holy Christian Church, and it is not the same as the WELS or as Grace Lutheran Church. Just as Jesus wants us to be on our guard against false teaching, so he wants us always to be on our guard against pride and against jealousy in our own hearts. He doesn't want us to be discouraged when others are blessed with outward success or are given opportunities that we don't always have.

Quite the opposite, Jesus wants us to support and encourage the spread of his gospel. He says to his disciples, **“I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.”** Faith shows itself in actions. The salt that Jesus speaks about shows itself, its seasoning, in the love that God’s people show to others.

And the love that we show has a vital purpose in our own lives and for the lives of others. Jesus first speaks about how we are to be concerned for the spiritual well-being of others. He says, **“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”** It is bad enough that we sin so persistently, but to cause others to fall into sin or to fall away from faith is awful even to consider. It would be better if the cause of that sin didn’t even have a chance to do so. It would be better for the upper millstone, often turned by pack animals, be tied on his neck and he be cast into the sea. Jesus uses the starkest of picture-language to describe the depths of his concern that we do not cause others to stumble.

And he is just as worried about our own spiritual well-being. In some of the strongest words of warning, Jesus alerts us to the dangers of sin in our own lives. **“If your hand causes you to sin, 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. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, 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, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”** Hell is real. It is eternal punishment. It is the wages of sin, it is their consequence.

But Jesus doesn’t want you there. He suffered hell so that you would never have to. He took the punishment that your sins deserve. He called you to be his disciple, his follower. And he wants you to keep on following. The gravest danger of sin is that when it is left unchecked, it leads us away from the Savior and back to the hell that we deserve. So Jesus warns: if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off...if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It would be worth it. It would be better to be maimed in this life and to still reach heaven rather than to be fine in this life and end up in hell. So why don’t we see more followers of Jesus missing hands and feet and eyes? The answer is simple. It’s not your eyes that cause you to sin or your hand or your feet. Your hands and feet and eyes are under the control of your will and your choices. What causes all of us to sin are our own sinful hearts as they fall into temptation. They cannot be stopped by maiming or crippling our bodies, but if they could, it would be absolutely worthwhile.

Which is why Jesus makes his point about salt. It is the Word of God, the Gospel that seasons and preserves lives of faith. It works through us to assist others as well. It points us to Jesus, the ever and always humble servant who forgives our sins of self-righteousness and jealousy. Our lives filled with the salt of God’s Word lead us to serve others and to glorify our God. Our lives filled with the salt of God’s Word allow us to live at peace with one another, not jealous of the accomplishments of others or concerned about our own glory or position.

And we don’t dare take it for granted. Jesus warns about salt losing its saltiness. It is hard for us even to imagine how our table salt would stop doing its job, but a more impure salt like at the time of Jesus may have sometimes lost its usefulness. God’s Word won’t lose its usefulness, but it won’t be of any value to us if we fail to use it. The salt in our own lives will lose its saltiness if we do not take to heart its warnings and hold dear its promises. It won’t have an effect on others around us if we do not share it.

We may very well take for granted the salt shaker at our table, but let’s never take for granted the salt that Jesus prescribes in our lives. Live at peace as your life is seasoned with love.

The text: Mark 9:38–50 (NIV84)

³⁸“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man 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. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

⁴²“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. ⁴³If your hand causes you to sin, 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. ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to sin, 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, ⁴⁸where “ ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’

⁴⁹Everyone will be salted with fire.

⁵⁰“Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”