

SERMON- Proper 21 (B)
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Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

Psalm 124

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
September 29, 2024

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

OPENING:

This passage has everything:

Demons and Exorcism

Fire and Brimstone,

Amputation and maybe a hint at sexual sin:

Finally, it just ends... with... Salt.

Mark wrote these verses and so he is presumably to blame for this mishmash menu of themes and stories and instructions.

People love to criticize poor Mark,

because it's obvious that he is just copying from oral tradition.

You can tell because there are mnemonic keywords,

a chain of phrases that connect these thoughts making it easier to deliver orally:

“in the name of”

“Stumbling”

“Salt”

“Jesus”

Those are the words that the original proclaimers of the Gospel could rely on to get themselves back on track.

Mark, it is said, clumsily threw it all together into the pot without editing.

Predictably, I am here to tell you that Mark knew exactly what he was doing when he put this all together.

More importantly, Jesus did.

Jesus gets a little..... a little salty here...

but he knows exactly why and for what effect.¹

He gets salty, because his disciples are getting too syrupy.

Jesus... wants to give us the healing power of the Gospel,

a cauterizing medicine of fire and salt that will heal,

but might hurt as well.

His disciples... and too often the Church since then,

want to make themselves (and us) feel good, by giving us sugar,

they want to give us a sweet confection and pretend like it's nourishing.²

¹ Myers, Ched. *Binding the Strong Man*. 259

² Capon, Robert. *Parables of Grace*. 180-184.

SALT:

So... with Jesus so salty... let's pause and consider what we know about salt:
To us, salt is relatively inexpensive, it's everywhere, there is saltshaker on every dining room and restaurant table in the country.

So much so, we seek to avoid it, to remove it from our diet for health reasons.
It was not that way in Jesus' time.

Salt was precious, used not only for seasoning, but as a preservative, and in worship ceremonies.

Salt is small, of course, tiny in fact, and when used in the right amount, you are not supposed to even see it.

Its power is in its very smallness.

If there is too much of it, it makes things taste too salty, inedible, and even harmful.

Jesus likes to talk about Salt because, like the Mustard Seed, and the Lost Sheep and the Widow's mite, and on and on, there was something about their diminutiveness and very smallness that make them important.

Salt is tiny but can have tremendous effects

Jesus is interested in that, and he never stops talking about that dynamic.

The disciples don't have any patience for it, they want to be big, they want to have a dramatic, instantaneous effect, and they want it to feel good. They want SUGAR, they get saccharine in their proclamation, offering Nutrasweet and pretending like what they are offering is the real thing.

That's why, at the start, they condemn the exorcist doing good works in Jesus' name, they say: "who is this guy? Who is this little loser? He is not one of the 12. He probably is not even baptized, confirmed, ordained, or in any way bonafide."

"We, the disciples think, "ARE all those things, and so we should be able to spread our sweetness around, and be duly congratulated."

"We" they say

As in that guy is not following "US."

Never was the royal "We" more misappropriated.³

Jesus, again, is salty so he says: "I am not sure, excuse me, what you mean by this "we"? I am not interested in that. I am interested in what God can do through God's

³ Myers, 259

people. And I actually have a pretty low bar for inclusion in my club: offer a drink of water, provide a speck of salt, wash someone's feet. Lose your life for my sake. Get defeated. Be... last. That's how I want to season my kingdom."

Unfortunately the disciples, and the Church, do not listen.

"The Church both now and then is far too many times found it easy to sell the sugar of moral and spiritual achievement than the salt of Jesus' passion and death.

We will preach salvation for the well-behaved and triumphantly correct in doctrine, (and) for those who can flash their winning report cards at Jesus.

But it's baloney because no one will have that kind of sugar to sweeten the deal."⁴

CROSS

Back to our passage: next, Jesus really gets going, and he almost gets too salty for us to understand, when he starts talking about chopping off body parts.

We ask, rightly:

"Did he mean it? Was he being literal? Should we follow the instruction in that recipe exactly?"

I indeed think Jesus is using hyperbole, in trying to make this point.

I think that because if you take the instructions at face value, if your hand sins, cut it off... if your foot sins, cut it off, etc.... None of us is making it out whole.

All of us would be double... triple... quadruple... amputees if we took this literally.

There has to be some other solution,

and we know what that is,

because we have read to the end of the Gospel,

we know what that missing ingredient is.

Jesus says: "You are not going to be able to make it. The Law will not save you."

So I will go in your place, I will offer up my own hands and feet, they will be pierced on your behalf, my eyes will be gouged."

Tough to hear, for us and the disciples. They prefer a quick sugar rush.

Ponder this: when we use the expression "pour salt in the wounds"—we mean to make a bad situation worse. But we also know that salt has been used as battlefield medicine and elsewhere for centuries, because it heals.

Salt, when administered properly, can stop bleeding and save lives.

Or in Jesus' words "Salt is good."

And "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace." Sounds simple but..

Anyone who has ever administered iodine to their child knows how hard it is to take

⁴ Capon, 180-184.

that medicine as they scream: “anything but that thing in the bottle that’s kept in the medicine cabinet for scraped knees and boo-boos of significant level.”

As adults we know it heals and we **should know** the cauterizing quality of the Gospel to heart and ingest it.

The salt of the Gospel is “Jesus died for our sins, Jesus has returned and defeated death. You are forgiven and you are free.”

We don’t want to hear it, this realization we cannot do that ourselves, that’s the sugar high that our culture and our religion sometimes, wants to sell you.

CONCLUSION:

My metaphors, I know, can be mixed:

“Just a spoon full of sugar, helps the medicine go down” goes the song from *Mary Poppins*. The songwriter composed that in 1960, inspired by his children taking the polio vaccine.⁵

In Mark’s time, Jesus’ time, the expression was different, but it meant the same and we still have it today. In Latin it was *cum grano salis*, “with a grain of salt” and it was used for an antidote for poison in that time, gradually ingesting antidotes of non-lethal versions.

Does that sound a little like Jesus’ instructions here? That you have to keep losing, keep losing limbs, keep picking up the shame of the cross. Keep humbling yourself and serving others for the sake of the Gospel.

A hard word for me and for you.

I will close with a more positive one.

The expression “worth your salt” means if you are worth, what you are being paid
More etymology: our word for *salary* comes from the same root word for “salt.”

Roman soldiers were paid in salt somehow, thus the expression: “worth your salt.”

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.”

Maybe Jesus is saying when he says “you are the salt of the earth” is saying, simply, “You are *my* currency”,

“You have value”

“You are valuable.”⁶

AMEN

⁵ [Our History | Vaccine Resources \(cincinnatichildrens.org\)](http://cincinnatichildrens.org)

⁶ Took this from Epiphany 5