

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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Worth Your Salt

Mark 9:50

As most of you know, this congregation follows the lectionary. The lectionary is an arrangement of readings of the Bible that, over 3 years, highlights most of the scriptures. Today is the set reading for the gospel of Mark. I share this with you for you might be thinking, “What an *interesting* choice for her to preach on her first time in this pulpit.” Well, I agree! What an *interesting* text I’ve been given—we’ve been given—for this week. It is a difficult passage, even frightening. There is drowning and unquenchable fire, hell and worms. It is frightening but at least it is not about us. At least it is about those people, the ones who are not saved, the ones who are hell bound. In fact, in some senses a part of us kind of likes this idea, don’t we? The sinner will pay. Even if the bad guy gets away with it on earth, there’s no getting away from it in death. Instead there’s fire and worms.

There is only one problem with this rendering: it *is* about us. This is the only time Jesus mentions hell in Mark’s gospel (go home today and check it out—it’s true!) and he doesn’t threaten the Pharisees with it or the pagans or the Romans. He threatens his own disciples. “If any of you”, he says to them, “If any of you, my closest disciples, do these things then it would be better to be drowned.” According to Mark, this threat is for his disciples so we should perk our ears, sit up a bit straighter and listen for “those people” have just become us.

While many over the centuries have taken this text seriously, to do that they have taken it literally. We have all heard about the extreme religious sects who cut off the thieving hand. But we can take Jesus’ words seriously without taking them literally. Most of us do not believe that Jesus wanted us to go around maiming ourselves in his name. He has the right to use hyperbole, doesn’t he?! So what does he mean? What is Jesus telling us? He is telling us that sin is serious. He is telling us we should do what it takes to keep ourselves from it. Whatever is causing you to sin, cut it off, cut it up, cut it out! It is that serious. And what is sin? We believe that sin is separation from God. Sinning keeps us separate and that separation is what we feel when we have sinned. Any of us who have known this feeling, who have known what it is to feel separated from God’s grace and love, we know that, truly, there is nothing worse. Drowning would be preferable. Feeling cut off from the one who made us is serious and sin is what leads us there.

Jesus’ message may sound harsh and we shouldn’t try to explain that away. It *is* harsh. But it is not harsh to be hateful. This is not a case of us sinners sitting in the hands of an angry God. He is being harsh, he is so serious, not because of meanness but because of our worth. He is harsh because we are valuable. He is serious because we are worth it.

Do you remember the end of the passage? “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves...” We may not think much of it with our cupboards full of salt, probably the Morton kind with the little girl on the label walking through the rain, but salt was precious. It cost a great deal, it was rare and it was only available in the Temple. Even though it cost, if you wanted to keep your food you had to go and have it salted. So only the food that was valuable was

taken. Only the food that was worth the travel, the trouble, the cost would be preserved. And “Have salt in yourselves,” Jesus says, for you are worth preserving.

This sense that harshness is not the whole story reminds me of an incident when I was little. I was probably 6 and my brother 4 (which means this even was probably *my* fault) and we were at a store with my mom. After we’d done our shopping we headed for the parking lot at which time my brother and I thought it would be the best thing ever to wrench our hands out of our mother’s hand and race through the busy parking lot to find our car. It had something to do with beating him to the front seat as I recall. Well you can imagine my mother when she got to us! I will tell you straight, she was not a spanker and she didn’t even usually have much of a temper with us. On that day, though, she found a way. She spanked my bottom and then my brother’s and we cried and moaned. Now I do not tell this story to advocate spanking and it’s not even those two or three swats I remember. What I remember is how upset she was. Her face had gone pale, she looked ready to cry, and all she kept saying was, “You don’t know how much you scared me! Don’t scare me like that ever again!”

Whatever makes you stumble, get rid of it, he says. Whatever it is in your life that has you dodging traffic and running from me, Jesus says, cut it out. My response is strong—not because I don’t care but because of how much I do. Because you don’t know how much you’ve scared me with your sin! So cut it off or cut it out, whatever it takes, because you are worth more than this. You are worth salting and saving.

So this is not an “us versus them” moment. It’s not a passage about all those other sinners. And thank God it is not. “Have salt in yourselves,” he says, and in that moment we are reminded of what he has always known, that we are worth the salt. We are worth the body. We are worth the blood. We are worth saving. Amen.