

Sermon

Salt Within and Peace With Others

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, September 26, 2021

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Prayer For Illumination —

Lord, we would not be so self-righteous if it were not so much fun. How easy it is for us to notice the speck in our neighbor's eye and overlook the log in our own. How much more satisfying it is to find fault with *them* than it is to contemplate the depths of our own depravity.

And yet, we hear your Word:

*Psa. 53:3 They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse;
there is no one who does good,
no, not one.*

We know that if we say we have no sin the truth is not in us . . . so, today speak your hard imperatives about salt and fire and learning to live peaceably with all. We will listen. We will suspend our inclinations to judgement long enough to entertain the alternative you are offering. Give us ears to hear, Lord, and hearts to hold the good news of your mercy and of our invitation to join you in it. Amen.

Rom. 12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Rom. 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Temptations to Sin

Mark 9:42 “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

Mark 9:49 “For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

- I. “Do not let dislike dominate your heart...”**
 - A. I first encountered this phrase in 2001.**
 - B. A friendly neighbor — retired pastor, very unhappy with the politics of the time... often angry**

1. **I watched his anger . . . saw how it consumed him and colored his life**
2. **More alarmingly I could see a similar anger within myself... My anger had been aptly described by Henri Nouwen:**

Anger in particular seems close to a professional vice in the contemporary ministry. Pastors are angry at their leaders for not leading and at their followers for not following. They are angry at those who do not come to church for not coming and angry at those who

do come for coming without enthusiasm. They are angry at their families, who make them feel guilty, and angry at themselves for not being who they want to be. This is not an open, blatant, roaring anger, but an anger hidden behind the smooth word, the smiling face, and the polite handshake. It is a frozen anger, an anger which settles into a biting resentment and slowly paralyzes a generous heart. If there is anything that makes the ministry look grim and dull, it is this dark, insidious anger in the servants of Christ.

From: *The Way of the Heart (section on compulsive ministers)*

Then I encountered Abba Moses — a voice from the first centuries of the Christian faith and I was introduced to the idea of “dying to one’s neighbor.”

Abba Moses — said to a brother:

“To die to one’s neighbor is this —

*To bear your own faults not paying attention to anyone else
wondering if they are good or bad.*

Do no harm to anyone,

Do not think anything bad in your heart towards anyone,

Do not scorn the person who does evil,

Do not put confidence in the one who does evil to his neighbor,

Do not rejoice with one who injures a neighbor,

Do not have hostile feelings towards anyone,

And do not let dislike dominate your heart.”

from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

Paul and Jesus *both* urge us to live peaceably with others

A. Paul in Romans 12:18

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

B. Jesus in Mark 9:50

“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

II. In the Gospel according to Mark

A. Jesus warns his followers about the danger of sin and the temptations to it — making a special appeal that they not lead children astray through their behaviors:

Mark 9:42 “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

B. It is interesting to note that ALL the accusations of error which follow are about recognizing *your own* faults and dealing with them.

43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell...

C. Verse 49 “salted with fire...”

1. This is a difficult phrase and no fewer than 15 interpretive options have been suggested by scholars. I’m not going to get into the thick weeds about this except to say that I am satisfied that:

- † **This is a literal rendering of a Hebrew or Aramaic idiom into Greek ...**
- † **That salt in Hebrew usage is:**
 - a. Purification**
 - b. Destruction**
 - c. Offering a sacrifice**
- † **For us to be “salted with fire,” is to —**
 - a. Practice self-examination to see what is inconsistent with the heart of Christ (impure).**
 - b. Commit ourselves to a life-long process of purging vices and promoting virtues. (destruction & purification)**

III. Paul in Romans echos this thought.

Rom. 12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

...

Rom. 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

A. What Jesus and Paul are asking is *not easy*

B. It is *not easy* to:

† **turn the other cheek**

† **to hate what is evil *in ourselves* before we think to analyze the evil in another...**

† **to bless those who trouble us**

† **to repay no one evil for evil**

C. These commitments to deal with our own sin and to practice extraordinary patience in the presence of other's foibles.... are Christianity's 600-level class

IV. So why would Jesus and Paul ask this of us?

A. Because these disciplines lead to compassion.

To die to our neighbors means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never coexist with judgment because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other. Much of our ministry is pervaded with judgments. Often quite unconsciously we classify our people as very good, good, neutral, bad, and very bad. These judgments influence deeply the thoughts, words, and actions of our ministry. Before we know it, we fall into the trap of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Those whom we consider lazy, indifferent, hostile, or obnoxious we treat as such, forcing them in this way to live up to our own views. And so, much of our ministry is limited by the snares of our own judgments. These self-created limits prevent us from being

available to people and shrivel up our compassion. “Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves” is a word of Jesus that is indeed very hard to live up to. But it contains the secret of a compassionate ministry.

Nouwen, Henri J. M.. *The Way of the Heart: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

B. We take on this hard path of paying attention to our own faults while avoiding the trap of gleefully(or angrily!) focussing on the faults of others —

1. Because we know we are the recipients of God’s compassion and we want to, in turn, have compassion for others.

*Psa. 145:8 The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

*9 The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*

Col. 3:12 As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion....

V. A simple but ancient discipline to help us do what the gospel asks of us — The Jesus Prayer

A. As you know I’m reading mostly ancient theology at present.

B. While the Jesus Prayer comes to us in the form I am about to give you from the 19th century . . . the prayer and the discipline of praying a very simple prayer to Jesus and repeating it often dates to the first centuries of the church.

"Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me"

- C. I can tell you from experience that if you will simply commit this one-sentence prayer to memory and if you will discipline yourself to repeat it in prayer as often as you can (thousands of times a day is not too much!)
*It will change you.***
- D. You will find your appetite for anger with others melting away.**
- E. You will be less judgmental — you cannot remind yourself in prayer hundreds or thousands of times a day that you are a sinner in need of God's mercy — and still feel like you have the high moral ground to find fault with those around you.**
- F. It will lead you to be gentle . . . to live a merciful life both with yourself and with those you encounter.**
- G. In this way you and I will be at peace.**

Abba Moses — A brother committed a fault and a council was convened to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone up to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you." So he got up, taking with him a leaking jug filled with water. When the brothers came out to meet him they asked him, "What is this Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and so - I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the error of another." When they heard what Moses had said they criticized the brother no more, but forgave him.