

Dying to Self

We said last Sunday that following the Mt. of Transfiguration, we are on a journey into the valley. Storm clouds are gathering. The enemies of Jesus are conspiring. We are on a journey that keeps getting darker until Jesus is crucified and sealed in the garden tomb. We are coming down from the mountaintop.

The first thing we encountered last Sunday, in coming down from the mountain, was the failure of the disciples, less Peter, James, & John. The nine who had been left behind while Jesus and the three were up on the mountain, failed to cast out a demon and then allowed themselves to be drawn into an argument with the enemies of Jesus. Notice how verses 30-32 fit in and follow up with what has come before. Mark 9:30-31a say, *"They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples."*

Jesus desired secrecy so that He could be alone with His disciples to teach them. Now that they know He is the Messiah, they need to be taught more about His mission and more about what it will mean for them to participate in the work He is pioneering. Their failure in helping the man with the demon-possessed son and their poor response to the criticism they received in the wake of that failure, show their need for further instruction. Jesus began this part of their training by reminding them what he told them right after Peter correctly identified Him as the Christ. Mark 9:31b-32 say, *"He said to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.' But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."*

For the second time Jesus gives His disciples the heart of His Messianic Mission, the work He will do to become their Savior and the Savior of the world; but, also for the second time, the information goes over their heads. Though what He says is plain, it is so far removed from their expectations they cannot embrace it. And having seen His reaction when Peter tried to argue with Him the first time, this time the disciples keep silent; they were afraid to bring up the subject, afraid they wouldn't like what they would hear.

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From Jesus' side, He is simply planting a seed. He knows they can't understand what He is doing, not yet, but some day they will remember what He has told them and put all the pieces together, someday but not today. At the moment the disciples are far too immature and self-centered to conceive of such a sacrifice. The disciples' immaturity and self-centeredness is given away by their squabbling as they travel back to their headquarters in Capernaum. Jesus overhears it and observes it, but doesn't say anything until He can be alone with them, in private. Then He opens up the subject by asking in Mark 9:33: *"What were you arguing about on the road?"* Mark 9:34 says, *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest."*

Do you see how human and how very much like us the disciples are? First, they had questions but were afraid to ask them because they didn't want to hear the answer. And, now they are asked a question and are afraid to answer because they know the truth will make them look bad; they are ashamed of their childish behavior. They are like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

Don't miss the irony of what's going on here: Jesus is talking about giving His life away for others; His disciples are arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. All the business back in chapter 8 about losing your life if you try to save it and saving your life by giving it away is lost on the disciples. They didn't buy into it for a moment. After all this time with Jesus, they were still living in the world of "me." They were still members of the "me first" club.

Whatever impatience Jesus was feeling toward His friends when He first came down from the Mt. of Transfiguration, however, has been released. He is very calm and deliberate as He begins anew to teach His disciples. Mark 9:35-37 say, *"Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.' He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'"*

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The message here hearkens back to giving your life away to save it. The most important will be the one who serves those who are considered the least important. Christians will find their greatness revealed when they make themselves slaves to those who have no power to hurt them or to benefit them. They will be pure, we will be pure, when the only motivation is agape love. **"And they will know we are Christians by our love."**

Yes, real Christians will be shown to be real Christians by their love. Another thing that sets the mature follower of Christ apart from the false or immature follower is his ability to embrace new brothers and sisters in Christ and brothers and sisters in Christ who are strangers to him. Notice verses 38-41 *"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."* *"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, for whoever is not against us is for us. 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."*

There is an unhealthy spirit among many groups of believers and among many local congregations, to see themselves as holy islands. We can become closed systems, loving to each other but closed off and cold to others. Dianna Bartley experienced this a couple of weeks ago when we took the bus trip to New York City. She got to Lowe's parking lot to catch our bus early. There happened to be another bus there also going to New York. It too was a church group. Thinking that it was our bus, Diana got on that bus, but when they found out that she was not one of their own, they gave her the cold shoulder. We don't want any of your kind on our bus. Diana's honest mistake was not met with understanding or playful kidding, but with rude rejection. **"And they will know we are Christians by our love."**

The next verses we encounter in our Scripture passage this morning stand out because of the gruesomeness of their images. Halloween was just last Wednesday, and these images fit right in. Listen to what Jesus says in Mark 9:42-47:

"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. 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."

Perhaps the most important word in understanding this passage is the word "And" at its beginning. The "And" connects these verses with the verses and the thoughts which have just preceded them. This connection reminds us that Jesus is still talking about a specific sort of sin. All sin is bad, but the sin of hatefulness and rejection of the powerless and of new believers is particularly heinous. Sinning against the "little ones," the defenseless and the most vulnerable, will get you into hell in a hurry. Trampling on the rights of the poor, neglecting or abusing the elderly and the infirm, taking unfair advantage of those who are mentally ill or slow, the strong preying on the weak, doing or saying anything that damages the faith of a new believer; such crimes will not go unpunished. It would be better to be drowned, maimed, and blind, than to come under the judgment of the Lord in these matters. **"And they will know we are Christians by our love."**

Our Scripture selection for this morning ends with Mark 9:49-50. Jesus says, "Everyone will be salted with fire. *"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."* Trying to figure out precisely what Jesus is talking about here is not easy, but the one thing we can understand, ties these two verses to the rest of the passage. The last phrase in verse 50 says, *"be at peace with each other."* In other words, no squabbling about who's the greatest, no prejudice against other believers who don't happen to be a part of our small group, no looking down on the weak, the poor, or the powerless. Be at peace with one another.

Salt had at least three different meanings in ancient thought, and it may be that all three of those meanings are in play here. The meaning of "salted with fire" is fairly self-evident; Jesus is talking about trouble and tribulation. Sooner or later all of us are going to be tested with hardship and with a certain amount of suffering. It's amazing how suffering can level the playing field and bring people together. Soldiers who face battle together become brothers and sisters. The survivors of the fires in California are bound together by their common loss. Bands of Christians going off in different directions will band together when persecution comes upon them. We *will* be salted with fire.

A second meaning of salt is that of the seasoning agent that gives taste and prevents spoiling. The followers of Jesus Christ are called to be seasoning agents in the world around them. We are to give Christian flavor to our society and to preserve it. If we don't do it, who will?

The third meaning of salt--and this meaning is the least familiar to us--is that salt was understood as the sign of a covenant between two people, or between two groups of people, that bound them together as brothers, sisters, and family. David McKenna gives this explanation in his commentary on Mark: "In the ancient East, courtesy dictated that a stranger be invited for a meal that included a ritual of eating bread and salt as a symbol of brotherhood . . . Arabs who are brothers by covenant rather than blood still say, 'There is salt between us.'" The last phrase of verse 50 cements our Scripture passage together: *"be at peace with each other."* **"And they will know that we are Christians by our love."**

Jesus' words to His disciples are Jesus' words to us. He calls us to renounce ungodly pride and to give up unseemly prejudice. He calls us to resist every temptation to exploit the weak. He calls us to follow Him in pouring out our lives to show His love for the world. The only way the world will recognize the Christ within us and among us is when they can see it in our love.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for November 4, 2007

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Mark 9:30-50

Jon R. Neely, Pastor