

As you know, we have a three-year lectionary cycle and are expected to use the readings that have been assigned for each Sunday. Sometimes this means that it is hard to find a way to relate the readings to what is going on: I remember preaching about the beheading of John the Baptist at a baptism which felt awkward to say the least. Today however, on my last official service for St. Paul's, the gospel reading fits the occasion perfectly. I know it might not seem so at first, but really, today's gospel is about what it means to be a community of disciples. If there is one thing that I have preached about over the past 10 years, it's community, our community as the body of Christ, a people called out to respond to God in this particular place but that does not mean that anything goes. Jesus is telling his disciples what to focus on in community. Even though Jesus' words feel over-the-top he is talking about life and death, about our salvation, the salvation that is found in a healthy, Christ-loving church, a church that knows Christ and makes him known.

First, we have the disciples complaining about someone who is casting out demons in Jesus' name. They are indignant, and perhaps jealous but Jesus says leave him be "Whoever is not against us is for us." Who are we to disparage the many ways that people find themselves called to Christ? We have to be careful not to hedge Christ in by our mortal understanding. That does not mean we don't need to be clear about our particular identity as Episcopal Christians or have boundaries around what is and is not acceptable to us, but it does mean that our way is not the only way.

Then Jesus switches gears and promises a reward to those who reach out to those who are in want, even something as simple as giving a cup of water in his name. He's setting expectations about how they (and the disciples that come after them) are to respond to those in need. St. Paul's has done an amazing job of providing water of one sort or another to those who are thirsty, amazing especially relative to our size and resources. This is not to say that there haven't been missed opportunities but between the Food Pantry, the Soup Kitchen, the Thrift Shop, and the other groups that have used our facilities you all have taken your ministry to heart.

Next, Jesus is adamant that his disciples do not behave in such a way as to discourage or turn away those little ones who are seeking faith. Little ones refers not just to children but to those who are new to believing in him. Anyone who shakes that faith through their words or behavior might as well be dead. Harsh words, but we have been entrusted with a "good news" that is not our own, and we need to handle it and ourselves, with care. If you have ever spoken with someone who did not feel welcome in church, or if you have ever experienced that feeling yourself, you know what Jesus is saying. Lack of welcome or inclusion can damage those who are tentative in their faith.

Jesus moves from the image of a stumbling block to the shocking image of someone being thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck. Jesus is serious about the disciple's role in helping believers to stay grounded in their faith. Look around you, do you know someone who is struggling, do you know someone who could use a friend, do you know someone with whom you struggle and in whom you need to see the face of Christ?

Jesus becomes more graphic and takes things one step further telling them to mutilate themselves if they sin because it is better to root out the cause of sin than to end up in hell. Very fire and brimstone and not what you normally heard preached in the Episcopal Church. But if we move beyond the radical and violent metaphor, Jesus is telling his disciples that we need to be disciplined in following him, we need to adhere to God's commandments or there will be consequences, so we need to strive to avoid becoming a stumbling block to ourselves.

Lastly, Jesus talks about the purifying qualities of fire. We will be tested and purified, meaning judged. This can seem scary, and it is certainly thought provoking. Jesus does not say if this salting with fire is in life or after death, but regardless, he means that after death our lives will be judged based on how we lived our lives – an entirely logical proposition considering what has come before.

Finally, Jesus starts talking about salt, how salt is beneficial, and it doesn't take much to list the ways, but he is applying the concept of salt to the disciples and by disciples, he doesn't mean just the 12 men who were following him but the communities that will develop to follow him not just as individuals but as a community, a community that we have come to know as the church.

It has been my privilege to be among this church community as your priest. You called me here, you called me to preach and to teach, to bless and forgive, to administer the sacraments, and to celebrate and to mourn with you in those transitional moments of life, as well as to ride herd on the wacky administrative issues that are an integral part of life in church. You called me as a rookie, straight out of seminary and your faith was so strong that even when I didn't know my you-know-what from my elbow, you were still faithful. I cannot express the depth of my gratitude for what it has meant to me to live into my vocation among you.

Someone once described you to me "quirky", and then looking at me with new eyes, said "but you're kinda quirky too." I cannot deny the truth of that so perhaps that is why we have done so well by each other over the past 10 years. Quirky or not, I have always looked forward to Sundays, to coming together with you to worship, to preach the gospel, and to spend some time in fellowship. I do rather resent the fact that COVID has deprived us of the last over the past 18 months.

There's a lot of change coming your way, and I know that it can be anxiety provoking. It is the responsibility of your wardens to report to you information about what happens next – when they know something! It is the responsibility of the wardens and the vestry to keep this place on an even keel and make sure it is ready for your next priest. It is true that St. Paul's has many challenges ahead regarding resources: financial, membership, an aging congregation, and buildings in need of ongoing maintenance. St. Paul's has faced challenges in the past and has prevailed. Trust in God that you will do so again, no matter what shape your prevailing will take and remember that in every challenge, there is also an opportunity. Give your anxiety to God. As long as the Holy Spirit feels welcome in this place, God will be with you. You are loved by God, you are loved individually as one of those lilies in the field, and you are loved by God as a community that knows Christ and makes Christ known. I will also add that you are loved by me, and I will continue to hold you in prayer.

Listen to those last words of Jesus to his disciples "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

Amen