

SERMON

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 26

September 27, 2009

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. David Galloway is often featured on “Day 1 Radio” which is considered to be the voice of mainline churches, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Galloway formerly served as an Episcopal priest in Atlanta, Georgia. A while back, he told a story that I would like to share with you. In his words:

“I had just finished playing a round of golf with my three best friends in Tyler, Texas. We had stopped into the 19th Hole, the men’s grill at Willowbrook Country Club, for some refreshments following our round. The room was full of people telling lies about their great round of golf – of spectacular shots made and of long putts sunk.

Into that room entered a man I shall call Hugh. Hugh was from central casting as to what a Texas oil man might look like – red-faced, large, and loud. Hugh always wanted you to know that he was in the house. He was a back-slapping, heehawing fellow both on the golf course and in the town.

Funny thing was that nobody wanted to play with him because he was so overbearing, so obnoxious. I’ll never forgive my friend Dan, who is a much better Christian than I am. He actually felt sorry for Hugh one day and invited him to join our group. For 18 holes, I had to put up with his loud-mouthed antics. It was the most horrible round of golf in my life.

But on this day, Hugh walked into the 19th Hole and was living large, a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other. He came up to my table and started talking loud, the only volume level he had. He was so loud that the attention of the other room naturally turned to him.

He bellowed at me, ‘You Episcopalians don’t believe in the Bible, do you?!’ Rather than take the bait, I just looked at him and smiled weakly, hoping he would pass on by like an East Texas thunderstorm.

He was referring to a recent decision by the church on some topic that was not to his liking. He went on, ‘David, I want to go to a church that is Bible-believing. Do you understand me? A place where the preacher is not trying to tippy-toe around the hard lessons of Jesus, a preacher who will lay it on the line, not try to water down the Gospel.’

I want a preacher who will be bold and put it out there, the full measure of the Bible, not hold back a lick. I want a preacher who will not let sinners slide and will call them out by name. I want the full Gospel. I don’t want a preacher to pussy-foot around the message of Jesus.’

I do not know where my response came from, but I heard it issuing forth from my lips after taking a long sip from my glass. ‘You want the full Gospel, Hugh? You mean the part about selling all you have and giving it to the poor?’

A pregnant silence fell over the room, after which Hugh responded, ‘Well, not that part!’

The room broke up in laughter. Hugh slunk out of the room as quietly as possible. Everyone was high-fiving me for having put Hugh in his place. ‘Way to go’s’ from Presbyterians, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews. David had slain Goliath one again, and all was right with the world.”

But you see, we all tend to pick and choose which parts of the Bible we want to hear. Today’s Gospel story is certainly no exception. It’s one we would probably rather forget.

Jesus is what you might call a “dead man walking.” He had just warned his disciples that execution awaits him in Jerusalem. But they do not understand. Remember, we heard last week that they were arguing amongst one another as to who was the greatest.

Jesus confronts them and says that greatness is not what they think. Rather those who wish to become great must become servants of all. For greatness in God’s Kingdom has to do with humility and service to others. It has to do with hospitality to the least and the most vulnerable – those without status.

The disciples are beginning to feel a little nervous. As we might say today; “They are under a lot of stress”. This is not turning out to be what they expected. Where is the powerful, triumphal Jesus who would save them from their Roman oppressors?

So what do people do in times of stress and uncertainty? We circle the wagons. We gather up the clan, and protect what is ours. We resist those who we perceive to be outsiders. Our country is currently doing this on our southern border.

Therefore, we should not be surprised by John’s statement in our Gospel story when he says; “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

In other words, we must reject him since he is not one of us. He is not part of our inner circle. I would guess that it might have even had something to do with jealousy. For earlier in this chapter, Mark had told us of a man who appealed to Jesus’ disciples to free his son from a spirit of dumbness. This anxious father told Jesus: “I asked your disciples to cast it out but they were unable to.”

A journalist once asked the famous American writer, three times Pulitzer Prize winner, Carl Sandburg, “What is the ugliest word in the English Language?” After a few minutes Sandburg replied, “Exclusive.” But you see, the ugliness of exclusive depends upon whether we are among the included or the excluded.

It's interesting how we pride ourselves on being members of exclusive clubs, living in exclusive neighborhoods, dining at exclusive restaurants, vacationing at exclusive resorts, belonging (dare we say) to exclusive churches. For being an insider carries with it a sense of pride and security.

Most of us have probably been on both sides of this. We have been at one time or another, in the "included" group and in the "excluded" group. Therefore, we all know how it feels when we are the ones who are "excluded." It's no fun. Indeed, it is truly hurtful.

Now notice how Jesus responds to the disciple's claim of exclusivity. He says; "Whoever is not against us is for us." In other words, he is included into the fellowship. Then Jesus goes into this tirade about sin, self-mutilation, judgment, and hell.

Now I am by no means considered to be a "hell, fire and brimstone" preacher. And the reason for this is, that in all of Scripture, the word that is translated "hell" only appears thirteen times – all in the New Testament – and nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. And as it is used here in Mark's Gospel, it refers to a specific place, in the actual landscape of the people living during that time.

The word that is translated "hell" is "Gehenna." Gehenna was the name given to the Hinnon valley outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Centuries before the time of Jesus, it had been a place of pagan idolatry, where unfaithful Israelites once offered up child sacrifices to the pagan gods of Molech and Baal. As a result, it had long been condemned by Josiah as an eternally unholy place.

Thus, by the time of Jesus, Gehenna had become the city dump. This was the place where rubbish, decaying carcasses of various animals, and leftover bones of the meat consumed by the people living in Jerusalem was discarded. This place was constantly kept burning, in order to purge it of the rot and decay that infested it.

Since Gehenna was an actual place at the time of Jesus, many Biblical scholars question whether Jesus was literally describing a place in the hereafter, or describing a present reality. At any rate, we certainly get the idea that Jesus does not take sin lightly, since this is where sinners end up.

He then goes on to talk about the benefits of salt, and concludes by saying; “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another. Of course, we all know what salt is. However, we might think of it a little differently today since it is so plentiful and cheap.

During New Testament times, salt was valuable. It was so valuable that it was sometimes used as currency. Usually, Roman soldiers were paid with money so that they could buy salt. But when money was scarce, they were paid with salt. As a matter of fact, our word “salary” comes for the root word “salt”.

So what does Jesus mean when he says, “Salt is good.” And that we are to have salt within ourselves?

Most of you remember the movie “Mary Poppins” that starred Julie Andrews. There was a song in there that I’m sure is familiar to most of us. It begins with the words; “Just a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down.”

You see, sugar is used like salt, to flavor things that we eat or drink. But they are not interchangeable, as they have different purposes. Sugar is used to sweeten, or perhaps more accurately, to mask the flavors that are bitter, sour, or even starting to spoil.

In comparison, salt brings out the flavors of the food, not masking them as much as preserving them, and emphasizing that which is good.

You know what I am talking about. Put enough sugar into something horrible tasting, and even the most taste sensitive child will eat or drink it. A great example of this is the base syrup of coke-a-cola. It is nasty! But add enough sugar to it and it covers up the natural bitter taste.

I think that this can better help us to understand what Jesus was talking about. Sugar can be seen as what covers up the sin in our lives. When someone has sinned, sometimes they try to “sugarcoat” it, we say. That means that they try to cover it up or make it sound not so bad.

However, the Gospel acts like salt. It gets into us, it invades us, it heals us, it preserves us, it brings out what is good in us. Literally salt can be used to heal. Remember having iodine put on a cut when you were young? Painful – yes, but it killed the bacteria. Or remember gargling with saltwater when you had a sore throat. Nasty! However, salt kills that which destroys and instead brings out life.

And where is it that we find this “spiritual” salt that Jesus is talking about? At the foot of the cross. It is the salty beads of sweat that drench us as we sit under the feet of Jesus. It is the salty tears that Jesus shed as he breathed his last. This is where we will receive our saltiness.

And because of that, we can become salt for the entire world. We can be the servant of all, the voice of the voiceless, the lover of the unlovable, the peacemaker, the caretaker of God’s creation, the seeker of justice, the example of Christ.

And how do we begin? With one small act of kindness after another. For Jesus said; “Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. A shared cup of cold water. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

How many of you like popcorn? Have you ever made popcorn at home?

Do you know what plain popcorn tastes like with nothing on it? *Styrofoam. It's tastes terrible.*

So in order for it to taste good, we have to put something on it. What do we usually put on our popcorn? *Salt*

Salt is important. We put it on all kinds of food because it brings out the flavor of the food.

In our Bible story today, Jesus says that "we are to have salt in ourselves, and be at peace with one another." Do you think that we have salt in us?

Let me ask you this. Have you ever tasted one of your tears when you cry? It tastes salty, doesn't it? See, we have that salt already in us.

Just like salt brings out the good taste in food, we are called to bring out the good in other people. God wants us to help people to do the right thing. Help people to do good just as we do good. That way, we can make the world a better place for everyone.

Let us pray... Dear God, you tell us to have salt inside of us so that we can bring out the good in people. We can't do that without you. Please give us your strength and love to help us. Amen.