

Seasoned Community, September 26, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Psalm 124; James 5.13-20; Mark 9.38-50

“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?”

Prayer

Sometimes we hear the scripture and the point it makes is clear. There is a clear moral or lesson or point to the text. Other times...it's not so clear. Or, as is the case today, it seems as though there are numerous points. Many *little* lessons that stand alone. The challenge is to see what (and if) they are saying when taken together.

The letter of James, as we had in our first reading, and as we've been looking at for the past few weeks, is sometimes described as “wisdom” literature. It's not really like the other letters (or epistles) we have in the New Testament. Those *other* letters are written to a particular group of people and often about a particular situation. The letter of James isn't as clearly written to *anyone*, and rather than dealing with one particular issue, it seems to have many smaller points, short aphorisms of advice in a more general way.

And in the gospel of Mark, our reading today seems to present Jesus as quite disjointed. He also seems to be making a whole series of small points, none of which are connected to each other. It's really difficult to get a sense of the *overall* point that Jesus is making, if there is one point. At first Jesus' seems to be talking about his disciples and their acceptance of others, then he's talking about those who *give* to *any* disciples, then he talks about those who obstruct little ones, then about body parts getting in one's *own* way before talking about fire and salt and how having salt in ourselves will somehow keep us at peace with others. Can you make sense of that? What is the logical *thread* which ties that all together?

It may be that these *isn't* any *one* thread. It may be instead that there are numerous *smaller* pieces of wisdom that are helpful. And I think that if we look at both the reading from James *and* the passage from Mark's gospel we heard today, we'll see that they each have something to tell us about life in community.

James' letter, although not intended for any one specific community (it is addressed to the twelve tribes in dispersion) is clearly intended for faith communities—especially the section we heard. He writes, “are any among you suffering/sick?” The response he prescribes is something that is done communally. If one is suffering, they should pray (together in community). If they are cheerful, the community should sing songs of praise. And if one is sick, they should have elders of the church pray for them and anoint them with oil. Likewise, confession is to be done in community. Forgiveness of sins (healing) happens in community. “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” This whole section of James' letter is a testament to the power of prayer—but it is also a testament to the power of living *in community*.

The ease with which James discusses suffering, sickness, and even sin suggests that each is a temporary condition. He is almost flippant with his prescriptions. These are simple problems and the remedy is equally straightforward. The challenge of one who “wanders from the truth” is only a little more complicated, if we consider the number of words used to describe the problem, but even there the one who wanders can be “brought back by another,” and this “will save the sinner's soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” But this is often the problem with wisdom literature: the solution proposed is

so simple, so straightforward that it seems to minimize the extent of the problem in the first place. Are you hungry? You need to eat! Are you thirsty? You'd better drink then. Are you tired? Sleep! Lonely? Find company! But I think we all realize that things can be more complicated than that for a variety of reasons.

But even when the problem *is* more complicated, the solution is much easier when it is sought in community. And it is in this community that James foresees all these problems being addressed. And it is in this community that the occasion for singing songs of praise presents itself, and is best realized.

And though it doesn't seem like it at first, Jesus' disjointed list of wise-sayings is *also* making a comment on life in community. The exorcist who wasn't following the disciples was not an adversary; "whoever is not against us is for us." Our communities need to draw the circle larger. Even small gestures made to those outside our circle—our community—will ensure we keep "the reward". Our community must be open, but at the same time we must be cautious about what and how we teach, that we don't lead others astray, especially those "little ones" who are new to the faith. We must take very seriously the sins that hold us back—we must not spare any member, even of our own body that causes us to stumble. And, perhaps most importantly, the purifying fire that Jesus promises will be applied to *everyone* in our community—we will *all* be "salted with fire"—so let us not think that we are exempt, that we are pure on our own. Instead, if we retain a little of that "salt", if we hold on to what we struggled through, this will help us to live peaceably with everyone, recognizing our common struggles.

Like James, some of Jesus' solutions to problems seem simple, straightforward. But awful. "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off." In this case, it is the individual that is in sight, and not the community (that may be eager to bring out the knives and read this passage literally).

I think what is imagined here is a community where *everyone* is struggling with something. And also, a community which is able to function *together*, like a body. To be clear, Jesus is speaking in extreme terms and not literally. A community which is able to function together and is not limited by the individual members and their unwillingness to see their own sin is one that *survives*: a community that is salted by fire, where the "flavour" is enhanced because each member has been salted with fire, acknowledging their own weaknesses and limitations and seeking full expression of their humanity as members of a group.

And it is not *any* group that can achieve this. This pandemic has caused many of us to rethink our circles and establish different connections than we may have had beforehand. Some of us have found new circles that are meeting our needs. Some of those circles might even be entirely virtual.

But there is something unique about a community that is gathered around a table—a community that gathers to worship our God. Of course we can share camaraderie with *any* group that we have things in common with, but the benefits to us who gather in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ exceed what any merely human gathering could possibly achieve. We are called to be salt and light in this world. A little saltiness is good—but a community without God has lost its saltiness. And what good is salt without saltiness?

But thanks be to God that we are called to this house to serve our God. That it is our God who is our helper and our redeemer. Who has rescued us and who continues to provide, care for, and minister to

us, the people of God. Who gives us the skills and abilities to comfort one another, and to welcome all who join us in the name of Jesus Christ. Who inspires the cheerful to sing songs of praise. Who enables us to welcome back a sinner from wandering, and to draw the circle wide, bringing more and more people into the fold who then welcome, gather, and encourage others in turn.

The Lord is on our side, and our help is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.