

“Living A Salty Life”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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James 5:13-20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

John 6:56-69

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your spirit. We pray that you would take the words of scripture that we have heard, the words in the songs and the prayers that we offer, the words that are within us now, and the word that you've placed upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of those words into the living word for each of us. And let that word, the word of Christ, the word alive within us, feeding our faith, guiding our actions, and calling us into service. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

In case you haven't figured out yet about the children's sermon, I didn't really want to talk about hands that cause you to stumble or feet that cause you to stumble or eyes that cause you to stumble because I didn't want to freak the children out [laughter]. As someone suggested earlier this morning, "You know what, you should save that passage until Halloween. Then it would be perfect." And it would be because we read these things that Jesus is saying that kind of makes us stop and go, "What is He talking about?" In fact, we probably all know that there are still cultures in this world where if someone is caught stealing, they will take that person to the square and put their arm on a block and take out a big knife and remove that person's hand as a warning to others to not steal as vengeance upon

those who steal. I don't think that that's exactly what Jesus is trying to get his disciples or us to understand about the hand and the foot and the eye. I can't believe that I'm saying this, but I think that maybe my mother had a little bit of gospel in her because every now and then when she found my brother and I up to some shenanigans that she didn't like, she'd come over to us or see us and go, "You know what, you guys, cut that out." I think Jesus the teacher is speaking to his disciples and to us in that same teaching voice. He's not saying to literally do anything. What he's saying is if you find something in your life that gets in the way of you being a faithful, loving Christian, you need to excise that part of you. Whether it's something you do or something you say, you need to try to remove it in order to be more available to the people that you're called to serve.

And one of the things that I often do with scripture as I sit with it and kind of work it through is I start at the end of the passage and kind of work my way back up towards the top. And I did that this week and to be honest, there's part of me that even though I wanted to address the cut-it-off sections of this passage, there's part of me that never wanted to leave the last verse. 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. As I sat with that passage and tried to understand what Jesus is trying to teach us, especially about salt, it directed me back to Matthew's gospel, the fifth chapter in the Beatitudes, where Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. And blessed are those who mourn. And blessed are those who hunger. And blessed are the merciful. And blessed are you if you get persecuted for my name's sake because they did that even to the prophets." And he goes on and the next thing he says, "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" The same thing we hear here in Mark. But in Matthew, Jesus goes on to say, "It's no longer good for anything. It's thrown out and trampled underfoot. And you are the light of the world. And a city built on a hill cannot be hid from no one after lighting a lamp and that light gives light to all people in the house." In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven. And if Jesus weren't so careful to not mix his metaphors or analogies or whatever they are, He might say, "You are the salt of the earth." And when God gives you a gift of saltiness in your life, don't try to hide it but live it out so that other people can see what you're doing. They can embrace it. They can learn from it. And you will enrich their lives if you will simply honor the goodness that resides within you, the saltiness of what the spirit makes all of us be and do. And as I thought about that idea of us embracing our created giftedness, that saltiness that we have and living that out for the benefit of others, there's part of me as an introverted person who thinks, "Oh, do I really want to share all of that energy of salt and gift with everyone? That's going to be very tiring. I'll need a nap." But then it dawned on me, my call is pretty clear. I get to preach and be your pastor. I love preaching. That's what God has placed upon my heart to do, and I can pay attention to that. And I think the trick for all of us is to figure out what are we called to do and then how do we honor that call and not get sidetracked, or not think that we got to be something else or do something else in our daily life, what we say and in what we do.

Now, I, as an introverted person, have fallen in love with -- early on in my journey -- with contemplative spirituality in the Christian tradition. I love the idea of having a retreat somewhere in the woods far away from anybody where I can sit and pray and drink coffee and wander around all by myself. And then Jani can come and visit me every now and then. And you know everything would be fine. In fact, when I was on retreat a couple of years ago out in California in the middle of nowhere hanging off the cliff in Big Surf, I read the rule of that community. And the first sentence of it is, "Sit in your cell as in paradise. Put the whole world behind you and forget it." So basically, the invitation for those monks is just to sit by themselves and to try to get rid of the world. And for some people, that's how they bring their giftedness to the world. They are going to sit in silence and pray for everybody. But yesterday I was confronted with a different way of looking. Bill and I, along with Debra, did a memorial service here for a woman named Jane Towater, a friend of the church. She'd come and do some music things, but most of us don't know her. Her whole life, her adult life, was committed to working with the YWCA and their principles of eliminating racism and empowering women. And everything she did or touched had that dual focus of eliminating racism and empowering women. And we heard story after story. And I, in preparation for preaching at the service had read multiple articles about her. And the thing that came across was, "Man, this woman lived her call. In fact, after Mandela was released in South Africa and the government changed and they were trying to reorganize everything, she got tapped by the United States' state department to go to South Africa to help them figure out how nonprofits could make that culture better. This woman, like I say, she had a clear sense of what her call in this life was about, and she would go after it and make it happen, not only for herself but especially for others. And part of what I read about her, everything that she did was sort of attributed to something that her parents had taught her. And it sounds a lot like Micah 6, but it's a little bit different. Her motto seemed to be, "Do good works,

stand up for justice, and love kindness." And Micah 6 says that we are to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. And what I saw and heard yesterday and thought about was that it's not surprising to me that Jane's parents left out the humble walk part because this woman was not humble or just walking through life. She was adventuresome, and she was an activist, and when she saw a problem she was willing to address it immediately, and she did it with respect for others and with respect for herself. In a sense, she learned how to be salty in this life, but also how to make space for other people being salty in life. She was able to bring things together to make life better. She didn't have to become something she wasn't in order to fit in or to be effective or to be faithful. She just did what God had placed upon her heart. I think that when Jesus says to all of us that we need to be salty or to have the salt in our lives, what he's telling us is we need to persevere and to be unashamed and unafraid. All of us have a gift, and what Jesus is teaching us is do not be afraid to use that gift for the betterment of life, especially for your neighbors. Amen.