
“Pour on the Salt”

Mark 9:38-50

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As a parent you have often heard these words from one or more of your children, “Mommy, Allie is playing with the toys and she won’t let me play with them.” To which you may have replied. “Allie, let your little sister play with the toys. Let her have a turn.” "Tattling" is telling on someone with the purpose of getting that other person in trouble. That’s exactly what John did about the healer who was offering compassionate help to people—even though he wasn’t one of the disciples’ own group.¹ To their own chagrin the disciples had failed to heal a boy so possessed by a spirit that everyone considered him dead. Jesus, however, exorcised the demonic spirit, and the boy was well again. In fact, if you read chapter nine in one sitting you will see that the whole chapter is filled with teachable moments for the disciples. From the Mount of Transfiguration, across the region of Galilee, and into Capernaum, Jesus taught them lessons. As we will see, however, Jesus doesn’t just address the tattling, he turns on the evil of unjust, unethical, and maybe even condemnable acts in which someone is turned away from the good news because of their own actions. Tattling was bad enough but personally throwing out rocks for people to trip over was unthinkable.

But what lessons and why? We can first review the passage with a little background for it to make more sense to us.

First, he taught them that they could expect a time in the future when he would be with them physically. They would have to learn how to stay together, work together, and together usher in the kingdom of God on his behalf. So, it wasn’t that John was being petty (maybe a little) but more like he was trying to figure out to maintain a clear narrative about what the kingdom of God was about anyway.

Second, Jesus taught them that compassion was far important than the institution they might have hoped to install. From the shrines he didn’t want the disciples to build at the foot of the mount to a closed system of insider types, Jesus wanted them all in on a new understanding of the kingdom. Judaism, as an

¹ See the stories from Luke 11:19 and Acts, 19:11-17, both accounts attributed to the physician and Gospel writer Luke.

institution, had failed on those two points—over committed to rules and under-committed to people whose lives were marginalized in their society.

Third, Jesus taught then about how important the “little ones” were in his narrative. The idea about “little ones” can and does refer to children. Yet, *as the story unfolds, it seems clear that Jesus extended the need for justice to anyone who might harm an innocent and trusting person who was earnestly seeking the kingdom of God, someone just like this exorcist. Scandalon*, the word we translate stumbling, means to trip up, to offend, to generate feelings of repulsion, to fall away. In the verses from this narrative that I did not read, verses 42-48, Jesus told the disciples that this “tattling” was just the kind of thing that became scandalizein (*to offend, to trip up*) for those who were catching on to the wind of the Spirit as it moved throughout Palestine. He used it four times in his lesson to them. And should it happen, he reminded them, the punishment should be undeniable and unforgettable.

Fourth, he used a cultural expression from his vernacular that the disciples knew well. That would have been true for those Jews who were with him. Salt with fire referred to a ritual in a sacrament from Leviticus and other places where salt and fire sanctified sacrifice on the altar. In fact, a verse that is very kin to this is one from Paul in Romans (12:1) where he pleaded from believers to present themselves holy and acceptable unto God which was their reasonable sacrifice (or worship).

Finally, reminiscent of the vernacular of the day, Jesus said something like “just get over it.” Be at peace with one another. Though the word “peace” here in the text means the absence of war, it is more likely that Jesus was using the word *Shalom*. When one is at peace then soul ceases to struggle since it has become disciplined against jealousy, hate, deceit, and lack of compassion.

So, the question is, “What does this teach us about how we are to be Christians in the 21st century?”

I think it teaches us that our work in God’s kingdom is a welcome and wonderful opportunity to share the good news, but there is something more that is just as important. It is just important that we interpret the kingdom of God as we go along. Teaching others outside our faith by our example of justice and compassion are undeniable proofs for the validity of the gospel in every person’s life.

It teaches us that our opinions about others carry substantial weight when it comes to our believability. It teaches us that we ought not to think so highly of ourselves that we put other people down, or downright count them out, when it

comes to how we fathom our future in our church. When we do, we forget, don't we that the church is Christ's in the first place? If we bring reproach on the gospel by our petty actions, then our "salt" becomes an unworthy and unholy element in our kingdom service. And, as Jesus taught, the soiled salt cannot even be used for the sacrifice of our praise.

Here is a letter from someone you know. Or, perhaps you know about. I have been leading a small group on the subject of "Faith in Art" and so I have been looking for teachable works of art that help the ones around the table to pursue their faith in the art they see, read, or hear. So, as I discovered this letter in my preparation for this sermon, I knew that I had to share it with you.

He was a "failed art dealer, failed teacher, failed evangelist, and if one accounts by economic success during his lifetime, failed artist. He struggled in personal relationships with family, friends and strangers. He thought of himself as a painter, but the world tried to send him another message. His work was not appreciated widely...or really at all. In 1880, while living in (Cuesmes), Belgium, in the mining region of the Borinage, he wrote in a letter to his brother:

So you mustn't think that I'm rejecting this or that; in my unbelief I'm a believer, in a way, and though having changed I am the same, and my torment is none other than this, what could I be good for, couldn't I serve and be useful in some way, how could I come to know more thoroughly, and go more deeply into this subject or that? Do you see, it continually torments me, and then you feel a prisoner in penury, excluded from participating in this work or that, and such and such necessary things are beyond your reach. Because of that, you're not without melancholy, and you feel emptiness where there could be friendship and high and serious affections, and you feel a terrible discouragement gnawing at your psychic energy itself, and fate seems able to put a barrier against the instincts for affection, or a tide of revulsion that overcomes you. And then you say, How long, O Lord! Well, then, what can I say; does what goes on inside show on the outside? Someone has a great fire in his soul and nobody ever comes to warm themselves at it, and passers-by see nothing but a little smoke at the top of the chimney and then go on their way. So now what are we to do, keep this fire alive inside, have salt in ourselves, wait patiently, but with how much impatience, await the hour, I say, when whoever wants to, will come and sit down there, will stay there, for all I know? (Letter 155, Br. 1990: 154

| *CL: 133; From: Vincent van Gogh, To: Theo van Gogh. Date: Cuesmes, between about Tuesday, 22 and Thursday, 24 June 1880*²”

Indeed, our lesson today is much like Vincent van Gogh’s insight when he asked his brother, “Now, what are we to do?” Regardless of the circumstances, our faithfulness to the salt within us and the inner peace it brings matters all together. Was the salt and fire in Vincent’s life the art he took a lifetime to produce or was the salt and fire the quest for meaning and identity in his life in search of God within? We must keep the fire of Christ’s message of love and hope alive inside us all the time and not just when we are here on Sundays. We must wait patiently, for the day will come when we will meet our own seekers who will want to come and sit down with us and converse about the gospel mission we are on. He or she will sense the bond of the kingdom between them and us. Perhaps, in this room, there is one or more who are privately seeking, who came here today just for that reason.

One time I stood in front of one of Vincent’s well-known works in the *Chicago Institute of Art*. In a sense I went there, sat down there, and would have stayed much longer had there been time for it. Would I have stayed there for a very long time? I do not know. But I have one last story, too. One time I sat on the top step of the porch of a small-town church. I was one of the little ones. I was a little boy then whose life was filled with way too much chaos for someone that age. I sat between two people, a man and his wife. I did not know they were pastor and wife. I didn’t know how that system worked. But, they told me about the salt and fire within them, though they did not use those words. Rather they told me what church was about and that if I came, and watched, and listened, I would find out what it was to be loved forever by a wonderfully compassionate God. Just as they had. I did not want to leave then, nor have I ever left. I have found my place in the community of Christian faith, and here I will stay forever.

² Lynn Miller, <http://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2015/09/art-lectionary-VanGogh-salt.html> (accessed September 29, 2018).