

September 27, 2009
Scarboro United Church
Calgary AB
Rev. J. Paul Mullen

“WELCOMING VISION”

Read: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
Psalm 124
James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Salt is in the news lately. Canadian processed foods have way more salt than the same brands in other countries. Processors are negotiating, under pressure, to reduce the amount in an orderly way to keep a level playing field.

A few years ago I learned that one Big Mac hamburger has a week's worth of salt in it. Salt not only makes it tasty, all that salt makes it pretty much addictive and, in the long run, potentially lethal!

We speak of salty language, salty tales. Is an old salt called that because of the sea, or the salty language used, or both?

Salt is vitally important and physically essential. Our nerves work on sodium that is obtained from salt. All our body fluids have a concentration of salt. If we get too little salt we die and if we get too much salt we die.

Do you remember seeing movies where people are in a life raft adrift on the ocean? After days and days without fresh water someone gets so desperate that they drink salt water from the ocean. Inevitably they die within a short time. I always wondered why until I learned a few years ago, how it worked. Apparently when there is too much salt in the body the kidneys call for more water to flush it out. The water comes from our internal organs, the juiciest parts, and all too soon the heart doesn't have enough water to function and it stops. I believe that is true although you may want to take it with a grain of salt.

The Bible calls us salt for the earth. To catch a bird you put salt on its tail. I remember trying that as a kid and realizing if you can get that close to a bird you don't need salt to catch it. You just close your hand around it. Other times you would invite someone to partake of your salt, your hospitality, your friendship. You may not have trusted someone unless you'd eaten a lot of salt with them. Salt has been a symbol of sanctity, perhaps because of its pure white colour.

Holy water used in the Roman Catholic churches has salt in it, perhaps to purify or disinfect it. Salt water swimming pools have replaced chlorine swimming pools.

Spilled salt is an omen, a sign of bad luck. In Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper, he wanted to show the particular moment when Jesus says "one of you will betray me." To do so he painted Judas clutching the bag of silver coins and at his elbow is a spilled bowl of salt.

When we spill salt we may throw a pinch over our left shoulder (that's the one where the devil resides, the angel is on the right). Salt is also a symbol of spiritual wisdom – the Latin word for savour or taste, "sapientia", also means wisdom.

So, as a Christian, are you worth your salt?

The word salary harkens back to ancient Greece and Rome where people were paid in salt. Salt was a valuable commodity. Being worth your salt means earning your pay or being worth your salary. Maybe we should re-think bonuses for corporate CEOs and present them with a big bag of salt at the end of the year. Or a lifetime supply when they retire. Double if they get fired after driving the company into bankruptcy!

Jesus says a couple of interesting things about salt. Being salted with fire recalls that salt was put on dung fuel as a catalyst, perhaps by absorbing moisture, making it burn hotter. If we have salt in us then perhaps the flame of the spirit will burn hotter and brighter. If the salt gets too damp, though, it loses its effectiveness and is thrown out.

The main thing, the punch line if you will, is that "we should have salt in us and be at peace with one another".

I have puzzled about that. I finally realized that to understand it a bit more we have to go back to the beginning. But let's stop in the middle first. That is where Jesus issues a warning to us about what will happen if we mistreat people.

I don't know about you, but over the years I picked up the idea (not from the United Church, but in a number of other fundamentalist contexts) that this whole business of being tossed into the sea with a millstone around one's neck was punishment for teaching wrong doctrine – being a stumbling block to them.

In a day when persons with disabilities were considered sinful and unclean and therefore outcasts, we have the strange scenario of Jesus telling his followers that they would be better off entering the Kingdom footless, handless and eyeless than to – what? Teach false doctrine? Or, be unwelcoming or inhospitable?

Back to the beginning of the passage. When John complains that someone is assuming Jesus' authority (a social sin in an honour-based society) in order to heal people, Jesus rebukes him saying, in effect, "If it works for him he can hardly speak against us!" Jesus cites the most generous reading of a popular law, "Whoever is not against us is for us" instead of the more restrictive and demanding corollary, "Who ever is not for us is against us" – which Jesus uses himself a chapter or two later. He then indicates that whoever shows his followers the smallest act of hospitality, a cup of

water, will share in the reward (of a right relationship). God's kingdom, God's realm of shalom, is a realm of right relations.

Jesus then gets a little harsh and spells out the consequences of being inhospitable. He infers that a lack of this most basic hospitality, refusing a cup of water to his followers, most of whom are of low or no status (little ones) is a stumbling block, and that such a refusal merits capital punishment – “the millstone award” as the Jesus Seminar calls it. Imagine wearing a wheel barrow sized rock on a necklace as you are dropped into the briny!

When he says it is better to lose hands, feet or eyes than to miss out on the Kingdom, Jesus is alluding to past actions (hands, feet) and thoughts and judgments (eyes). If we were all literalists the church would be filled with blind people with no hands and no feet!

Hell, Gehenna was the always-burning yet wormy garbage dump where all trash, including the bodies of outcasts and sinners, were disposed.

Can it be that a lack of hospitality is so critical? Hospitality is easy with those who are like us, what about those who are different?

The passage finishes with some words about salt, a healing preservative, encouraging us to be "salted". (Did you hear about the soda cracker that wandered alone down a dark alley? He was a salted!).

I do get the idea that we keep each other salty and that it has to do with hospitality, recognizing both the humanity and divinity in each of us.

My farming Aunt straightened me out when I spouted the hackneyed adage, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink." As I nodded my head in agreement with my own profundity she said simply but sharply, "Course you can!" When I looked at her in puzzlement (a short distance it is between profundity and puzzlement), she added, "You just feed it a little salt!"

How can we feed each other enough salt to make us thirsty for more good news?

Salt is a metaphor for wisdom and also for courage. To me it implies a gentle courage that enables us to speak our truth. Salt is also a metaphor for truth.

The world hungers for gentle people who will speak words of truth with courage in awkward and dangerous situations, challenging deception and delusion, creating thirst for living water.

May we all have enough salt in us to make ourselves and others thirst for the waters of eternal welcome and hospitality.

Amen

