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

Mark 9: 38-50

*“Sharing Salt”*

September 30, 2018

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Both of the readings today are stories that begin with complaints. The Israelites are tired of wandering in the desert, and they’re hungry. As a result, Moses isn’t very happy either, and is tired of doing things alone. As for the disciples, they aren’t happy that there other people are doing work in Jesus’ name. Jesus pretty much tells them to get over it.

Being a community, and belonging to a community are important – but *becoming* a community doesn’t happen overnight. There’s a reason the Israelites needed that time in the wilderness! There is debate about how long the enslavement in Egypt was – Exodus declares it to have been 430 years, but the generational accounting of some of the patriarchs doesn’t add up. A Rabbinic accounting adds up to 210 years.[[1]](#footnote-2) Suffice to say, either way, there were several generations enslaved over a long period of time.

They needed those 40 years in the desert to reclaim their identity and become a community in a new way. They needed a new covenant.

While God declared that God would be the Hebrews’ God, and they would be God’s people…they were, shall we say, a little recalcitrant?

Side note 1: I’ve learned that God is patient, *and* will offer a swift kick to the backside as necessary.

Side note 2: To quote from Star Trek, “Resistance is futile.” (The Borg didn’t win, but God *always* wins.)

We all know that change can be hard. I don’t know how many of you make New Year’s Resolutions…nor will I ask you how you’ve done with them. Sometimes mine stick – but not always. But perhaps, if we had someone, or a group of someones, who helped us to be accountable, we’d be more eager to share how those resolutions are going. Communities don’t always come together, or change, naturally, either. The irreverent seven last words of the church are, “But we’ve always done it this way.”

Ultimately, the total number of years of their captivity does not matter. In order to become God’s people, they needed time apart, in the wilderness, to learn a new way. They needed to experience God’s presence; to learn how to trust God, to receive the Ten Commandments – which offer the basic rules of engagement for living in community – and to learn the rituals that set them apart. Their identity needed to change from slave, to child of God. They needed to become saltier.

Salt is important – it adds and enhances flavor, and it is a preservative. Biblically, to have salt, is to be at peace. Salt is also a symbol of covenant. If you share salt, you share fellowship and are in a covenant. Jesus tells the disciples, “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.”

The lead up to our reading in Mark, is the disciples arguing about which one of them was the greatest. Jesus schools them on that account. This is immediately followed by Jesus’ rebuke to John’s complaint of someone else casting out demons’ in Jesus’ name. Jesus reminds the disciples that they are not an insular group. They, *we*, are not to be stumbling blocks to someone else’s work in Jesus’ name. Their community is not closed. Nor is ours. The disciples don’t know it yet, but they are going to be important instruments in creating a new community – those who will become followers of Jesus. Just as the Israelites needed time in the desert, the disciples need this time of following, learning and being *with* Jesus in order to carry on Jesus’ ministry and share what will be the good news of the Gospel.

It’s important to remember that it is not really possible to be a Christian by yourself! Remember that “wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”? (Matthew 18:20). We can do more together, than The Trinity, itself, is a symbol of community – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because in addition to serving, we also need to be fed, strengthened, cared for, loved.

Being a part of a community comes with benefits…and responsibilities. One of my favorite images of church comes from the book *Making a Home for Faith* by Elizabeth Caldwell. She describes community as a group of people carrying one in need on their shoulders – when that person’s time of need is over, he or she rejoins the others in carrying someone else in their time of need. Like the disciples, we are called, and sent, to care for others within this Grace community, the larger community around us, and beyond. Like the disciples, we are called to do our best to live our lives according to Jesus’ teaching. To do our best to be the face of Christ to *all* whom we encounter. And *not* in the style of the person spouting hell and damnation from a megaphone, or wearing a billboard sign that proclaims the end is near.

We gather here to here to worship, to be in prayer for one another, to listen to one another, spend time learning, and in fellowship. One of the good things about Facebook is our ability to run a live stream of our worship service. Those who are unable to be here, for any variety of reasons – travel, illness, homebound, are able to be a part of the community – present for worship, and sharing the rituals of faith with others in the online worshipping community – and our AV Team. (The passing of the peace is as exuberant on line as it is in the sanctuary!)

And thus strengthened and encouraged to do go out into the world, saltier, do carry on Jesus’ ministry.

I’m not saying that’s always easy! You only have to spend a little time on the roads in the DC Metro area to know that! Or read the front page of the newspaper of your choice. We might not be able to fix those particular problems– but we also don’t have to be *part* of the problem.

No ONE person… No ONE worshipping community can do it all. It requires the participation and gifts of *each* one in the community. William Sloane Coffin, who was a campus minister at Yale, and senior minister at Riverside Church, wrote “Many of us overvalue autonomy, the strength to stand alone, the capacity to act independently. Far too few of us pay attention to the virtues of dependence and interdependence, and especially the capacity to be vulnerable. Learning, and especially unlearning, can only take place in the absence of defensiveness. When we drop our defenses, we can learn. And we can drop our defenses only we love and are loved.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Messages of hope, generosity in sharing God’s love, and caring for the community within the walls of this building, and caring for the community outside the walls of this building *are what we do*. You can’t be a Christian alone. You can’t do church alone. But *together*, as a community of faith, with the Holy Spirit, we can do a lot. It’s part of our covenant with God.

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had this to say this to say about community:

“The first service one owes to others in a community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. “God’s love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives God’s Word but also lends us God’s ear.  . . . We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them."[[3]](#footnote-4)

And this: “The community of the saints is not an 'ideal' community consisting of perfect and sinless men and women, where there is no need of further repentance. No, it is a community which proves that it is worthy of the gospel of forgiveness by constantly and sincerely proclaiming God's forgiveness. ”[[4]](#footnote-5)

In a community of faith, ideally, it’s where we are able to share a set of beliefs with others, to support and care for each other – in times of joy and in sorrow, and share the work that needs to be done. Where we seek to learn and deepen our faith together. Those in a time of strong faith encouraging those in a time of flagging faith. It’s a place where each one should be safe to be his, her or their own best self. And a place where no one should depart as a stranger.

We’re living in a time of great rancor and polarization. We have the ability to add salt, if you will, and offer a different way of being. And, perhaps, a different way to be in conversation. It’s not necessary to agree on everything, but we can offer compassion, listening, words of healing and grace. We can assist in breaking down some of the social barriers – as Moses does with the Israelites when they complain about others prophesying in the camp (Moses’ response is “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and the Lord would put his spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:29) Jesus’ response to John’s complaint is similar, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us if for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name Christ will by no means lose the reward.”(Mark 9: 40-41).

Remember, that just as there are varieties of salt – we are each unique individuals with different strengths, weaknesses, and gifts called to go out into the world as followers of Christ to share the love and hope that is within us.

Have courage. Be of good faith. Remember that you are not alone. And be salty. Amen.

1. <https://thetorah.com/how-many-years-were-the-israelites-in-egypt/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Coffin, William Sloan. *Credo.* Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2002. Page 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/inspiring-quotes/20-influential-quotes-by-dietrich-bonhoeffer.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Bonhoeffer, Deitrich. *Life Together* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)