

September 30, 2018 – Mark 9:38-50

God's Word is full of symbols. I think we all know that. From objects to events to people, the Bible makes thorough use of symbols as a teaching tool. Likewise, Jesus uses symbols as teaching tools. When Jesus uses a symbol as a teaching tool, we usually call it a parable. But it's still a symbol.

And I think we all know that some symbols are very easy to understand and some are very difficult. Because symbols need a point of reference. In order for a symbol to be useful, you need to know what it is symbolizing.

For example, when we moved to Missouri and got new driver's licenses, we had to take a brief eye exam. But it wasn't just your standard eye chart. It included identifying the meaning of a whole bunch of road signs as well. To an experienced driver, they were simple and commonplace. Stop signs, yield signs, no entry signs, and such. But someone who had never driven before? They would be completely guessing at their meaning.

I bring all this up because that's exactly what happens in our Gospel message for today. Near the end of the passage, Jesus uses salt as a symbol. Now, this should be fairly familiar. We've heard salt used as a symbol elsewhere in the Gospels. In Matthew 5, specifically, Jesus refers to his disciples as the salt of the earth.

And when he does so, it's both a compliment and a warning. A blessing and a curse. You are salt. You can make the world less bitter. But you can only do that if you are actually salty. If you lose your saltiness. If you cease to do the work that I have given you to do. Well, then, you're just gonna get trampled.

It's a good message. And it seems like it's the same message Jesus is giving here. He even uses the same expression, "If salt loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?" In fact, it's tempting to believe this might even be the same event. That Matthew 5 and Mark 9 are just retelling the same story. That happens plenty of times in the Gospels.

But they're not. Not even close. Because "salt" in Matthew 5 is a completely different symbol than "salt" in Mark 9. Jesus is using the symbol of salt in two entirely different ways. Because, in this passage, "salt" isn't what we are. It's what's done to us.

To make any sense of this, we need to know Jesus' point of reference. What is Jesus talking about here? Well, it all starts because the disciples see a man casting out demons using Jesus' name... and they don't like it. Why don't they like it?

Well, it probably has something to do with what we heard about in our Gospel lessons these past few weeks. The disciples have started to get arrogant. They're arguing over who is the greatest among them. Who's the most powerful. Who's the most famous. Who does Jesus like the best.

And in the mean time, they are failing at the assignments that Jesus gives them because they don't pray. They start trying to do everything by their own strength and their own power. They don't turn to God in humility. They don't turn to Jesus for help. And they end up with demons that they can't cast out because they're too full of themselves to realize where their power really comes from.

And so, now, they see this guy casting out demons in Jesus' name and their pride just takes over. "No! You're not a disciple. You're not important. You're not allowed to pull off miracles that we just failed at. Get out! Stop making us look bad! You're not one of us!"

Jesus is not happy about this. "Of course he's one of us! Would anybody really start casting out demons in my name if he weren't one of my disciples? Isn't believing that my name has that kind of power really part of the definition of being my disciple?"

"And, really, why would anybody help us out if he weren't on our side? Why would someone even offer you a drink of water in my name if they didn't see the value in my mission. There's no earthly reward for doing what we do. Being my disciple carries no monetary value."

In fact, as Jesus spells out so clearly, being a disciple of Christ is all about sacrifice. It's about giving up your sinful, mortal lives for the kingdom of God. That's what He means when He talks about cutting off a hand or a foot or an eye rather than falling into sin. He doesn't mean that we need to literally mutilate ourselves for Him.

But we do need to recognize the tremendous sacrifice it is to be His disciples. To cut off your own hand or foot or eye would be horrifically painful and disfiguring and it would leave you handicapped in everything you do.

That's what sin is for us. It's a part of us. We're born with it. And cutting it out of our lives is like cutting off a limb. It's unthinkable and painful and it leaves us feeling handicapped. Because the entire world around us just keeps on sinning. It's so much easier to sin. And every time we struggle to resist, it feels like we're living this life with one hand tied behind our back.

But that's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And that brings us back to our symbol. To be a disciple is to be salted... with fire. It's to daily ask God to sprinkle you with salt. But it's not salt that makes the world around us less bitter.

No, it's salt that makes you less bitter in God's eyes. It's salt that burns you like fire. That burns away all of your impurities. That burns away all of your unrighteousness. That burns away that hand or foot or eye that wants to sin.

To use Martin Luther's terminology, to be salted with fire is to daily drown the old man. To daily turn to God in prayer and say, "Lord, kill this man inside of me that wants to sin. Cut out whatever part of me you have to so that I can do the work of your kingdom. Burn away everything within me that wants to drag me away from you."

The harsh reality is that the disciples never had to worry about whether or not to accept that man they found casting out demons. Because no one in their right mind *wants* to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Period. It is totally counter-intuitive.

If you really and truly know what it means to be a Christian, then you are accepting a life of sacrifice and self-denial. You are accepting a life in which the world looks at you as someone disfigured and handicapped. Because in their eyes, sin is normal and beautiful and acceptable. And anyone without is a freak.

Anyone without sin should be mocked and ridiculed and spit upon and nailed to a cross. Because who in their right mind would want to cut off their own hand? Who in their right mind would want to be salted with fire? Who in their right mind would want to kill everything inside them that gave them pleasure and power in this world, in order to find joy and peace in the next?

The disciples rejected that man casting out demons because they thought they were the in-crowd. When, in reality, they were the outcasts. They were the ones who would soon face rejection. And the last thing that they should ever be doing is rejecting one of their own.

And that is Jesus' last message for us in this Gospel lesson. That's actually the message of all three of our Scripture readings today. Be at peace with each other. We're all in this together. We all fight with temptation. We all struggle with our sins. We all try to find hope in a hopeless world. We're all sinners. And we're all disciples.

We are already rejected from this world. And the last thing we should do is reject one of our own. Seek out that salt that burns away your sins and be at peace with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Be at peace with those who have the Spirit of God within them. Be at peace with your community of faith. Don't stop them. Don't hinder them.

For, just like you, they have been salted with fire. They have cut off their limbs. We have all, in our own ways, sacrificed greatly for the sake of Christ. And we have all, in our own ways, sacrificed not nearly enough for the sake Christ. And yet we have each been accepted into the kingdom of God. Because of the sacrifice Christ Jesus made for us. Amen.