

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 26, 2021 – Perfectly Salted
Matthew 5:13-16 and Mark 9:38-41, 50**

In our second lesson this morning, the protective nature of tribal identity is on full display. John, one of the twelve disciples, approaches Jesus. I imagine him here standing tall and proud with his chest puffed out as he delivers a line with every expectation of affirmation for a job well done. “Teacher,” he says, “we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

With this introduction, the passage reels us in, peeking our curiosity with claims of powerful deeds and setting the stage for an emerging struggle regarding who will lead the nascent Christian community. Notably, the fellowship is expanding. We know that this is true because individuals are ministering in the name of Jesus whom the disciples have never met.

Yet, what might be viewed with joy by some does not sit well with John, who reprimands a faith healer whom he has not personally vetted. John’s suspicions get the best of him, and he quickly assigns this man the label of “not authorized to serve in Jesus’ name.” His rationale for this is simple and, on the surface, understandable: the unnamed healer is from a different tribe which is not “following us.”

Here I ask you to pause for a moment and consider the root of John's objection, which hinges on this notion that Jesus was not "following *us*." Friends, the last time that I checked, we were supposed to be following Jesus, not the disciples. Right? Which means that it is more than a bit troubling when John dismisses others for not "following *us*."

While we might wish that this was an isolated incident, the tension found here clearly existed elsewhere. Later, Paul described similar challenges in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me... that there are quarrels among you... What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

So when John brags, "we tried to stop him, because he was not following *us*," Jesus is not nearly as impressed as his disciple had hoped. And in Jesus' response, we are reminded of my opening claim about the protective nature of tribal identity.

About the persistent boundaries that linger among us. About the ever-present fault lines that first appear as cliques during childhood, and later return in the form of various loyalties at each phase of our lives.

You've observed this reality before. You know how we often divide ourselves among ethnic, geographic, and cultural lines. How we separate ourselves according to language, and income, and religious affiliation. How we naturally gravitate toward those who are like us. Taken to the extreme, a tribal mentality is forever perpetuating the contrasts between us and them. Between insiders and outsiders. Between those who belong in our inner circle and those who do not. This is exactly what John was highlighting when he proclaimed, "we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Yet, just as Jesus has little patience for our petty squabbles regarding who will be called the greatest, he has little desire to affirm John's dismissal of the unknown healer. In essence, Jesus says, "It doesn't matter if you personally know your fellow co-workers in Christ or not. Get over yourself. Expand your view about what it means to be my followers. Expand your view about who is worthy to serve. And expand your view about what is possible when the Holy Spirit moves beyond the

bounds of your tribe. For the message of the good news of Jesus Christ is for all people. And guess what? You can't reach all of them on your own. You are going to need some help, and some support, which is only possible through the efforts of thousands of other leaders in the faith who can capably spread this message that everyone needs to hear."

In short, Jesus tells John to check his ego at the door, and to embrace the inclusive nature of the kingdom of God. "Do not stop him;" says Jesus, "for no one who does a deed a power in my name will soon be able afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

Today, we have chosen to gather in a Presbyterian community because we like it here. We like the music, and the liturgy, and the theology, and the way that we do things in this place. So we give of our time, and our expertise, and our financial resources so that this community can be lifted up.

And yet, our personal preferences do not imply that every other Christian community is to be dismissed, or ignored, or slighted. For we are all a part of the same family of faith, despite our theological differences, despite our variations in style, and despite the divergent way in which we choose to govern ourselves. And

because we need this reminder, Jesus instructs us that to be perfectly salted is to “be at peace with one another.” For this is what is pleasing, and good, and right.

You know, as one who preaches on a regular basis, I often consider the hypocrisy that seems so prevalent in the profession to which I have dedicated my life. For we all know that it is much easier to explain the passages that are found in the Bible than it is to embody those messages. And every week, as I strive to interpret the word of God, I am challenged to live up to the lofty ideals that I profess, in the hope that others might recognize signs of salt, and light, and life.

Finally, it is God alone, the author and perfecter of our faith, who summons us to service, who calls us to ministry, and who will not let us go. It is the example of God’s Son which shows us the way. And it is the uncontainable work of the Holy Spirit that breathes life into ministries near and far, known and unknown, to the ends of the earth.

So let your territorial instincts fade away. Do not immediately dismiss other faiths, or their leaders, or the people with whom you share these pews. But view one another as partners in ministry. Endowed with particular gifts. Set a part by God.

And be grateful in this day that the Lord has made, for it has the potential to be perfectly salted. May it be so, and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.