

Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV)

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. "For everyone will be salted with fire. 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."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lately, it seems like bad things keep happening to people I care about. There have been traffic accidents and illnesses and surgeries and various other kinds of problems and I've had my hands full with visits to people's homes and to hospitals and emergency rooms. Now, this is always part of congregational life, life together in this extended family, but this fall has begun with a half-dozen emergencies right off the bat, and some of these seem very unfortunate and bordering on unfair.

So I find myself and those involved in the prayer ministries of the congregation (which is all of us, of course), we find ourselves

wrestling with some distinctive problems that come up when we confront bad things happening to people we care about. First, is this fair? And second, what can I do?

It turns out that there is help in the readings today for both of these questions. First, is this fair? We know that Christians are not saved from the pains and problems of life, and if I didn't know that before I entered ministry, I sure know it now. In fact, if anything, Christians might expect to have more than their fair share of life's difficulties, simply because we place ourselves in harm's way, with the last, the least and the lost, with the sick and the poor and the suffering. There is every reason to expect that that will rub off a little.

Beyond that, as I've walked with our parishioners in this unfortunate fall, I have noticed how they and other members of the congregation have reacted sometimes with extraordinary nobility and kindness. People who had every right to complain and moan about their lives have instead rediscovered what is really important and valuable and true.

The Gospel reading, today, ends with some wonderful talk about salt. Let's take those last verses apart, a bit. "For everyone will be salted with fire." Wow! First, what does that mean, to be "salted with fire?" As I read it this time, I think it means we will be seasoned with difficulties and pain, that through difficulties and pain we will be preserved and perfected, our flaws and selfishness and childishness will be burned away, and we will be transformed. Second, note: *everyone*. No exclusions, none left out. We'll all have our turn, one way or another.

And as I see it today, some of the difficulties of this difficult fall have had this effect, not immediately, but slowly and over time. Some of our young people have felt that first frost of misfortune and have grown from it and will continue to grow from it. Some adult members have begun to confront injuries and illnesses that will become a part of their lives – I know that I have – and these illnesses

and injuries give us a certain kinship with other people, a certain common basis in experience.

In confronting misfortune and injury and illness we confront ourselves, not as we wish we were or imagine we used to be, but as we are. These are the experiences that increase the acreage of our souls. To know that maybe we won't get completely better, that we need to face some limitations, is to share what Paul called the "thorn in his flesh," to truly know that God's power is made more perfect in weakness. Is this not seasoning? And while we would wish to avoid some of the more painful aspects – I know I would – the experience of growing and deepening would not be the same. Life isn't hypothetical, a mental experiment. Life is lived, in all its messiness and complexity and pain. And while I would never wish misfortune on anyone, I also wouldn't want to keep this experience of growth and depth from others who will profit from it.

And the Gospel reading goes on: "Salt is good. But if it has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." I've often puzzled over these sentences, but in the context of this difficult fall, I feel a new kinship with them. Perhaps what Jesus is saying is that the very bitterness of salt, the very bitterness of experience is what makes it effective as a teacher – if experience loses its sting, how can it teach us, how can it broaden and deepen us? And how can return bitterness to experience, if that is our goal? And so, Jesus says, have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another. Now, perhaps what Jesus is saying is simply that – in the ancient Near East, sharing salt was part of a treaty relationship.

But now, I'm wondering. It could also be that by sharing the bitterness of experience we come to a new peace with one another, a peace that understands the deep ways in which we are all the same.

You see, we are all the same in our fears, in our pain. Ironically, we are all the same, too, in our isolation, in our aloneness. We are all the same in thinking that there is no one like us. Isn't that

interesting? Our injuries may be different but we are all the same in thinking our injuries are unique. The thing that is common to all of us is the feeling that we are unique.

So, where do we go with that insight? Does it mean that we're all wrong – that we really are all the same? Well, not exactly, although we aren't, probably, as different from one another as we think. No, we don't all have the *same* injuries, but we all have injuries. There's a quote attributed by some to Plato and by others to Philo: "Be kind, because everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." Not the same battle, necessarily, but a great battle nonetheless, and that is what we share. We are all fighting a great battle. It may be a battle against being alone, or against relationship. It may be a battle against being feeling too much, or against not feeling enough. It may be a battle against being a victim, or against someone who is acts like a victim. We are all fighting a great battle.

This insight has some very practical implications. When we try to comfort someone, we should never say, "I know how you feel." Never, never, never. You don't know how they feel and it's insulting to think you do. But you do know that their feelings are very important to them at the moment, so you can and should ask, "How are you feeling?" It is better to listen than to speak.

A final set of thoughts. Yesterday we were at the Synod Assembly where we were talking about stewardship, and I had a kind of quirky insight, my favorite kind. Usually when we think about stewardship, we are thinking about the wonderful gifts that God gives us, about the rich and beautiful creation given for our use, and we ask ourselves whether we make appropriate use of these gifts. But as I listened I wondered whether we are good stewards of the experiences God provides in our lives. Do we allow our experiences to teach us and change us in the ways that we should?

Some of our experiences are very fortunate – having good teachers, going to good schools, having a good job, having opportunities to travel, to live in interesting places or to meet vital

and interesting people. And if we are good stewards of those experiences, we might use them to develop a wider and more compassionate perspective, a broader outlook, a greater appreciation of the world in which we live. And we certainly know people who have been fortunate in these ways and are appropriately grateful.

But we also know people who have had experiences that we might consider unfortunate, people who have been tested, people who have been disadvantaged various ways, people who have had illnesses or injuries of the type I talked about earlier. Now, to be sure, sometimes these experiences make people bitter and resentful and make them begrudge people who haven't had to deal with the disadvantages they have had to. But at the same time, we all also have known people who have taken these kinds of experiences and used them to become grateful for what they have received, kinder and more compassionate. And, let me suggest that people who have broadened their outlooks, enriched their compassion, who have found an deeper love for God and their fellow people, that these people have been good stewards of the experiences that God has offered them in their lives. In the sense that we come into life with nothing and leave it with nothing but our experiences, then it follows that our lives are enriched when we have been good stewards of our life experiences.

We all have been or will be seasoned by fire at some time in our lives which is another way of saying that we are stewards of the experiences God gives us in our lives. Learning from our experiences, good or bad, happy or sad, is practicing good stewardship with God's gift of life to us.

Amen.