

WORTH YOUR SALT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On June 1, 1958, Frederick Buechner, prolific writer of novels, poetry, theology, and essays, was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. Here's how he describes the experience: "That spring, on the first of June, 1958, I was ordained in the chapel of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, where some four and a half years earlier I had heard George Buttrick give the sermons that had started me on my way. I sat by myself in the front pew feeling awkward and unreal. Dr. Muilenberg preached on Elijah's handing his mantle over to Elisha. Dr. John Knox preached on two texts from Matthew. In one of them, Jesus commanded his disciples to go out into the world and proclaim the Gospel, Dr. Knox said, but in the other he told them that it would be better to have a millstone fastened around their necks and be drowned in the depths of the sea than to cause anyone who believed in him to sin. As I knelt there in the chancel with the hands of all the assembled ministers and elders heavy on my skull, I had no doubts, if I had ever had any before, that it was a risky as well as a holy trade that I had chosen."¹

Perhaps you have never have been nor never will be ordained as a Presbyterian minister, and feel "the hands of all the assembled ministers and elders heavy on [your] skull." Even so, when you think about your life as a follower of Jesus Christ, Buechner's final comment is applicable and timely for each and every one of us who call ourselves Christians – it is a risky and holy trade that you have chosen. To use the final image from today's gospel story, it's worth asking, Are you worth your salt as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

If you're "worth your salt" that usually means you're worthy of your wages or pay. In other words, you're a good employee. Did you know that our word "salary" comes from the Latin word for salt, which is *sal*? A Roman soldier was paid a *salarium* (salt money) that he used to buy salt and other essential supplies. Salt was a prized commodity, valuable for its preservative qualities when there was no such thing as refrigeration.

When I was growing up, I learned that if you spilled salt on the table, that meant bad luck. You were supposed to toss salt over your left shoulder to ward off the bad luck. It never made sense to me that you would throw more salt over your shoulder when you accidentally spilled salt, especially if that meant bad luck . . . Oh, well! Because of its preservative qualities and its necessity for life, salt became a symbol of essential life forces. Salt also took on religious significance. In the Old Testament, offerings and sacrifices were seasoned with salt. Covenants were sealed with the exchange of salt, perhaps over a common meal. As the margin note in today's bulletin

says, “Salt’s preservative value made it a good symbol for the durability of God’s covenant.”

Think about it – when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus Christ, being worth your salt means much more than being worth any salary or being a good employee. Being worth your salt as a follower of Jesus Christ has to do with being worthwhile. No wonder, then, that when Jesus once again taught his disciples what it meant to be his followers, he said, “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.” (Mark 9:50) That sounds a lot like Jesus’s teaching in his Sermon on the Mount: “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” (Matthew 5:13) Along the same lines, the apostle Paul wrote these instructions to the believers at Colossae: “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” (Colossians 4:6)

Speaking of “outsiders,” how ironic is it that today’s gospel story begins with John complaining to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us”? (Mark 9:38) Back at the beginning of Chapter 9, Peter, James, and John were up on the mountain, watching Jesus being transfigured in all of his glory. Maybe that experience planted the seed for James and John to ask Jesus later to put them in positions of power in his coming kingdom. Anyway, when they came down from the mountain, they ran into a crowd of folks arguing with the other nine disciples. When Jesus asked, “What are you arguing about?” someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” (Mark 9:16-17)

How rich is that? And how utterly human? And how very familiar? When the disciples saw an “outsider” casting out demons in Jesus’s name, they tried to stop him; and when they couldn’t stop him, they appealed to Jesus to stop him. Why? What a telling answer! “Because he was not following us!” But remember, it’s not about following “them.” It’s all about following **Jesus**. And Jesus emphasizes that when he tells his disciples, “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.” (Mark 9:39-40) That sounds a lot like our Old Testament story, doesn’t it? Eldad and Medad were “outsiders.” They weren’t with the seventy “chosen” elders and Moses at the tent. Still, they received God’s spirit and prophesied. At that point, the story is almost exactly like our gospel story: And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, **one of his chosen men**, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.” (Numbers 11:27-29)

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets! Would that all the Lord's people would do deeds of power in Jesus's name! Would that all the Lord's people would be worth our salt as followers of Jesus! And it's really no mystery what it means to be "worth your salt" as one of Jesus' followers. After all, he has been teaching his disciples (and us) all along the way: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Remember Frederick Buechner's thoughts as he felt the weight of the ministers' and elders' hands on his head? "It was a risky as well as a holy trade that I had chosen." Following Jesus is risky as well as holy . . . Following Jesus means being humble enough to recognize that being a disciple is not all about you, but all about Jesus. Following Jesus means recognizing the value of the ministry others have to offer, even those "outsiders" who are not following us. Following Jesus means being humble enough to receive a cup of water from someone because you bear the name of Jesus Christ, not because of anything you have done or because you are more powerful, more worthy, or the greatest of all. Following Jesus means bearing responsibility for the nurture of the faith of others as well as your own faith. It's a risky and holy trade, this following Jesus, because if we cause others to stumble or put obstacles in their way of faith or cause them to sin and fall away from Jesus, well . . . you heard what Jesus said about our necks and hands and feet and eyes. I think Jesus is exaggerating here, as he often does to make his point. If we take him literally, we would all be lying around with no hands, no feet, and no eyes, because we all sin and cause others to sin. No, Jesus is reminding us that being his follower is a serious matter, indeed.

Being "worth our salt" as followers of Jesus is a great way to summarize what it means to live in and for the kingdom of God. In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Lamar Williamson puts it this way, "Disciples whose lives are not characterized by lowly service nor by openness to Christians who are different nor by care for those who are young in the faith nor by rigorous self-discipline are like flavorless salt. They have lost the sharpness which sets them apart from their environment and which constitutes their usefulness. Disciples, therefore, are to be salty Christians in the sense in which Jesus was salty. They will then be at peace with one another, for they will be harder on themselves than on others whom they will welcome and assist in the common journey following Jesus."²

There is a story about a man who walked into a little mom-and-pop grocery store and asked, "Do you sell salt?" "Ha!" said Pop the proprietor. "Do we sell salt! Just look!" And Pop showed the customer one entire wall of shelves stocked with nothing but salt—Morton salt, iodized salt, kosher salt, sea salt, rock salt, garlic salt, seasoning salt, Epsom salts—every kind of salt imaginable.

"Wow!" said the customer. "You think that's something?" said Pop with a wave of his hand. "That's nothing! Come look." And Pop led the customer to a back room filled with shelves and bins and cartons and barrels and boxes of salt. "Do we sell salt?" he said. "Unbelievable!" said the customer.

“You think that’s something?” said Pop. “Come! I’ll show you salt!” And Pop led the customer down some steps into a huge basement, five times as large as the previous room, filled floor-to-ceiling with every imaginable form and size and shape of salt—even huge ten-pound salt licks for the cow pasture.

“Incredible!” said the customer. “You really do sell salt!”

“Sell salt? No!” said Pop. “That’s just the problem! We never **sell** salt! But that salt salesman—Hoo-boy! Does **he** sell salt!”

The moral of that story? Salt that stays on the shelf doesn’t do any good at all.³

Jesus’s message for us as his followers: “You are the salt of the earth. Have salt in yourselves. Be worth your salt.”

Let us pray: Lord, be with us this day, helping us to put our priorities in order; so that we may faithfully serve you by serving your people. Heal our spirits. Enable us to follow your ways all the days of our lives. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983)

²Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), p.

³D. James Kennedy, *Led by the Carpenter: Finding God’s Purpose for Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 46