

Got Salt?

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 30, 2018

St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL

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Mark 9:38-50

Sometimes it is difficult for us to read the Bible in context. There are many ways to read the Bible, but still, I am convinced that the baseline for all readings of sacred scripture must address what the author intended to communicate to his intended audience, and that means we have to read our sacred texts in their historical and literary contexts. And while many people acknowledge this to be true, the reasons we have difficulty doing this are a multifaceted problem.

One facet of this problem (and there are many) is that the majority of people access the Bible primarily through translations. Now, when we look back on the history of the world and recognize (a) that for centuries people didn't have the Bible in their language and (b) for most of Jewish and Christian history the idea of owning a personal copy of the Bible, much less one in your language, was an impossible dream. So, we should give thanks to God every single day that we can own copies of God's Word in our language, and this privilege should make us want to read our Bibles every single because we can while most of our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout human history could not.

However, we must recognize that every translation of the Bible has a layer of interpretation already on it. There's no such thing as neutral or unbiased translation. As they teach you when you study Greek and Hebrew in school, translation is treason. Try as you might, you will add something, and you will lose something. It just happens. Sometimes it's unintentional. Sometimes it's intentional. This is especially true of translation by committee, which is how most of our English translations are done.

An obvious example of this happened in our reading this morning, so take out your insert or open your Bibles, and let's look at it because this is a significant enough issue that we should all be aware of it. In Mark chapter 9, verses 43, 45, and 47 (you might have noticed there was no v. 44 or 46, that's another history of the English Bible issue) Jesus, in the ESV and most other English translations, uses the word 'hell.' The Greek word here is the word *gehenna*, and this word is a Greek vocalization of the Hebrew *bene hinnom*, which means "the sons of Hinnom," which is itself a shortened way of referring to the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, which is a place that you can point to on a map. It is not the place we think of when we use the word 'hell' because that place cannot be located on a map.

Gehenna is the name of a valley located on the south slope of Jerusalem where Ahaz and Manasseh burned sacrifices to Molech and even sacrificed their sons in the fire (2 Chron 28:3; 33:6; 2 Kings 16:3). Jeremiah speaks about this and the coming judgment upon the city because of it. He says in chapter 7 starting at verse 30, "For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the LORD. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away" (7:30–33; cf. 19:1–13; 32:34–35; cf. Is 31:9; 66:24).

Now, before anyone says, "Fr. Michael doesn't believe in hell," let me be clear. I'm talking about this word in these verses. I'm not telling you to go out from here believing that hell doesn't exist. I'm telling you that in these verses in our reading this morning the word 'hell' doesn't mean what you think it means, and that for me changes this entire passage. Jesus doesn't take a hard turn from teaching about his death and what it means to be great to teaching on eternal punishment, but instead, he's right

on message. He's a Jeremiadic prophet, announcing impending judgment upon the city and telling his disciples that they better choose sides.

Have you ever been around someone who, in a real moment of crisis, when things really matter, is asking all the wrong sorts of questions? The kind of person who just doesn't seem to understand the significance of the moment, who just doesn't get it? Jesus is surrounded by at least 12 of those people, which must have maddening. He's trying to tell that the most important moment in human history and the most agonizing, excruciating moment of his entire life is barreling down upon them, and they're asking questions about who's the greatest and complaining about those other people who are doing works in your name but aren't part of their circle. It's ridiculous to the point of idiocy.

Jesus wants them, he wants us, to feel the weight of this moment. To be on the wrong side of this, to be on the side that thinks about profits, power, privilege, and prestige is to be on the side that ends up in judgment, the side that ends up cast into the valley when judgment comes upon the city. "This is important," Jesus is saying. "Stop thinking about the 4 Ps and think about what is at stake. Even if what you're thinking about is good, like your hand, your foot, and your eye are all good things, if it doesn't fit with the way of the Lord, with the way of the cross, then it has to go."

"For everyone," Jesus says, "will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." "Have salt in yourselves" sounds a lot like Jesus' saying in Matthew, "You are the salt of the earth" (5:13). What salt does is salt preserves, and you can tell if salt is going to be effective at its job of preservation by how salty it is. If it's lost its saltiness, it cannot preserve.

Jesus' command to his disciples and us is not to figure out which of us is the greatest and it's not to make sure that people who aren't exactly like us don't do things in Jesus' name. His final command in this chapter to his disciples is that they are to have salt in themselves, because, even though they don't

know it yet, when he's gone, it will be their job to be the salt of the earth, to help preserve what is good in it and bring it into the kingdom of God. And if they're focused on profits, power, prestige, and privilege, they won't be able to do that. To focus on those things is to risk judgment. Instead, Jesus is saying, focus on the cross, and be at peace with one another.

Amen.