SALT LIFE
Scripture: James 5:13-20 and Mark 9:38-50

FOCUS: We are called to be salty people who add flavor to life, who preserve peace and who honor God in all that we do.

I’m sure you have seen the decal before. Did you notice it on the door as you came in or on my shirt? It is the popular logo for a line of casual clothing, “Salt Life.” Many of us enjoy spending time in the briny air close to the salt water of the Gulf of Mexico. There is something therapeutic about the sound of waves lapping up on shore. Few things are as peaceful as a casual walk on the beach early in the morning before the crowds begin to gather. And there are the sunsets and sunrises, not to mention the seafood. For we who live near the gulf the idea of the salt life brings a warm fuzzy feeling and perhaps a longing to get away for a relaxing few days.

But that is not always what comes to mind when you think of the affect salt may have on the lives of some folks. As fall progresses, and the inevitable winter snows await just around the corner, folks in the Northeast are not looking forward at all to the kind of salt life which will surely be upon them in a few months. For them the image is of snow blowers and shovels, of white out conditions and cars buried by massive snowplows. To be sure, for many weeks, probably months, folks in places like Boston and New York will be enduring, not loving the salt life.

As I wrestled with this week’s lectionary texts I kept coming back to the notion that what we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to is the salt life. Now I’m talking here neither about mountains of the mineral piled up in anticipation of being need to keep streets clear of snow and ice this winter nor about that wonderful saline quality of the air on the coast. I’m talking about the kind of saltiness we explored with the children this morning. The kind of saltiness Jesus spoke of on several occasions. The saltiness that sets true disciples apart as unique.

When we consider salt these days lives our thoughts probably go immediately to the dinner table. Salt just somehow makes things more flavorful. We hear a lot about sodium, salt. Some of you are hearing a lot about low salt these days. It is true that, for the most part, our diets, especially if we tend to eat fast food or rely on processed foods at home, are laden with more sodium that we ought to have. But we dare not cut out salt all together, for an appropriate amount of sodium is required to keep this complex machine we call our bodies in good working order. Salt is vital for water retention, for proper digestions, for muscle contraction. But like so many things, moderation is called for when it comes to our sodium consumption.

When Jesus began talking of salt with the disciples their minds would have also gone to the dinner table. The first thing that would have come to mind was probably not flavoring, rather, preservation. In that era with no refrigeration and much heat, salt was extremely important as the primary agent in the preservation of foods. But Jesus would have certainly also been thinking of other common uses of the day. Salt was a flavor enhancer then as now. Salt was thought to have medicinal benefits and was used as a disinfectant. Salt played an important role in the Jewish sacrificial systems and was recognized as a symbol of the people’s covenant with God. Keep all those characteristics in mind as we think about what it means to be those who live the gospel salt life.

There are some pretty good reflections of that life in our text from James’ letter. Remember that this is a letter which was most likely sent around to various churches urging them to remain faithful and confronting some of the challenges the congregations were facing. There were beginning to be some divisions, pride and selfishness were creeping in and James wanted to see the churches come together as the true families of faith they were intended to be.

He begins by asking some questions. ***“Are any of you suffering? Are any of you cheerful? Are any of you sick?*** Few were literate in those days so most likely the letter would have been read to the congregations as they gathered. As they listened most, if not all, could identify with one or more of those questions. If I were to ask for a show of hands most of us could identify as well. James offers guidance concerning how to react when we encounter life’s varied challenges and joys. I fear our reactions are not always what James is recommending.

***“Are you suffering?”*** If we are not careful we might respond, ***“You bet I am and I am mad as a hornet about it. I don’t deserve it. Nobody understands, nobody cares.”***  ***“Are you cheerful today?”*** We might respond, ***“Yes I am I’m feeling pretty good and I have some plans to just enjoy myself this afternoon. After all I have worked hard and it has been a long week and I deserve to feel good about what I have made of myself.” “Are you sick?”*** We might be tempted to say, ***“Oh yes I am, but it is just the cross I must bear. Don’t worry about me, I’ll just suffer through all this on my own.***

James has a much better way. You see James is writing in hopes of reawakening a sense of community and mission in the lives of congregations about which he cares deeply. His answer. If you are suffering, pray. If you are cheerful prayerfully sing praise songs. If you are sick call your church family members and have them pray and anoint you with oil. James reminds us that if we are to live the salt life we must be women and men, boys and girls of prayer. By implication what James is saying is that in all situations we are to be people of real fervent and honest prayer. Think about your prayer life with me for a moment. When is it that you pray? About what is it that you pray? How often do you pray? There is, perhaps, an even more fundamental and important questions we need to ask here. What is prayer?

According to the National Day of Prayer Task force, ***“Prayer is dialog and relationship with God and has the power to change one heart and change an entire nation.”***  On their website The United States Council of Catholic Bishops says this of prayer, ***“God invites us into a relationship with Him that is both personal and communal. He speaks to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh. Prayer is our response to God who is already speaking or, better yet, revealing Himself to us. Therefore, prayer is not merely an exchange of words, but it engages the whole person in a relationship with God the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.”***

On the website of an organization with the intimidating name Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry I found these words: ***“Prayer is the practice of the presence of God. It is the place where pride is abandoned, hope is lifted, and supplication is made. Prayer is the place of admitting our need, of adopting humility, and claiming dependence upon God. Prayer is the exercise of faith and hope. Prayer is the privilege of touching the heart of the Father through the Son of God, Jesus our Lord.”*** Greg Laurie of Harvest Church, a multisite congregation in California has this to say about prayer ***“True prayer is what happens when our will is aligned with the will of God, and we pray accordingly. Prayer is our connection to heaven and heaven's connection to us—that is why you should always keep the lines open!*** ***Prayer is as essential to knowing God and growing spiritually as breathing is to living and staying healthy.”***

I was a bit disappointed when I searched our United Methodist Church’s site and found no definition. My search returned 4,490 results, but of what I saw the majority were articles about certain prayer concerns, about gatherings for prayer and the like. The two articles said to be the most relevant to my search were, ***“Ten Ways to Improve Your Prayer life”*** and ***“Re-energize Your Prayer Life with a new practice.”*** Now I am certainly open to ways to improve my prayer life and there is no doubt that at times it definitely needs reenergizing. But I think what is most needed in our churches today and in our individual lives is a better understanding of what prayer really is. Did you notice that in none of the definitions I found was there much about words? And in none of them is there a reference to public prayer. Folks, as I have said before, the problem is not that prayer has been taken out of our schools or out of our civic gatherings. The real problem with prayer in America is that prayer has been neglected in the lives of those of us who are called to live every moment of every day guided by it.

So what is prayer? I think in the definitions we have heard we find a clear trend. Prayer is more about activity than about language, more about relationship than about form. We heard these words, ***“Prayer is dialog and relationship with God.” “Prayer is our response to God who is already speaking or, better yet, revealing Himself to us.” “Prayer is the practice of the presence of God.” “True prayer is what happens when our will is aligned with the will of God.”*** So as we seek to become people of prayer, as James calls us to be, I would suggest to you that real prayer is not what we say before meals and perhaps as we go to bed. Real prayer is an active lifestyle which reflects, all day long, our relationship with God through the power of the Spirit of Christ.

Prayer is the foundation of the true salt and life and prayer is profoundly personal. Yet it is also profoundly communal. We experienced that as we began our Wednesday Prayer Gatherings last year in response to the fire. James points us to the communal benefits of prayer and challenges us to support one another and to be willing to call on each other. Notice that he instructs those who are sick to call on the elders to pray over them. A couple of things of note here. Those who are sick are to reach out to the leaders of the congregation and to solicit their support. How many times do we have needs but keep them to ourselves. Our relationships, one to another, ought to be such that we never hesitate to call on each other in times of need nor to share our joys when they come. We ought to all be willing to pray with each other at any time. We certainly do that by speaking to God with our sister or brother in need, but we also pray with them as we listen compassionately, as we offer to bring them a meal or go to the store, as we pick up the phone to check on them.

So what about the anointing with oil thing? At our men’s study this week I was asked about that. I have on rare occasions done it when asked. It can be a very holy moment. But it must be properly understood. In the first century the placing of oil was often done in a medicinal way. It was seen to have physical healing powers. But there was then and there is now there is another aspect to the ritual. When we Methodists anoint with oil we do not see it as some kind of magical potion, rather it is symbolic of the power of the Holy Spirit. As we anoint in the sign of the cross we are calling upon God’s Spirit to abide with the one to whom the oil is administered. We are calling forth the Spirit and commending the brother or sister to the care of the Spirit and to God’s will. And the anointing is always accompanied by prayer. It is a mark of the communal nature of the salt life.

In a very real way, if we truly understand the meaning and scope of this wonderful gift called prayer, we have all the direction we need, for real prayer invades every corner of our lives and seeks to direct each decision and to guide in every moment. But we all need some reminders from time to time of what the life guided by prayer looks like. So let’s return to the scripture from Mark. There is a very interesting and telling contrast between the self-righteous attitude of the disciples as reflected in John’s question and the seemingly horrific advice offered by Jesus.

John demonstrates a deplorable part of our human nature which just will not go away. He comes running to Jesus, certain that he can get an outsider in trouble. Does that sound familiar? Such behavior begins in kindergarten or before and is alive and well in office complexes filled with middle aged adults. ***“Ooh, ooh Jesus,”*** John says, ***“There is a guy out there casting out demons in your name, and we didn’t give him permission. Do you want to go with me to humiliate him and make him stop?”*** Ok, I used a bit of poetic license there, but it is certainly in the spirit of what John was getting at and it is in the spirit of how we often react. John and the disciples were not focused on what really mattered, the good news that someone had been restored by God’s grace. They were focused instead on themselves and what they considered to be their private domain. The problem was that they failed to recognize the scope of the domain which they so proudly claimed as theirs. And in being so myopic, they overlooked the good that ws being done by one they considered to be unworthy.

Jesus response was swift and dramatic. He said, ***“Hey, anyone who seeks to do good in my name is welcomed and is far more a part of my kingdom than those who talk all the time but do little. Those who seek to trip up anyone doing good in my name are in deep trouble!”*** Then Jesus speaks those words of hyperbole about cutting off appendages and putting out eyes. Of course Jesus was not really advocating self-mutilation. He had experience with those disciples and knew that they could be a bit thick headed. So he chose to get their attention with his word play.

So what was his point? It was that, as those who ought to be living that prayerful, salt life, the disciples would be much better served by getting rid of all the unsalted parts of their life instead of worrying about what others were doing. Talk about a message the twenty-first century church needs to hear. Talk about a message we all need to hear on occasion. Jesus’ parable about the speck and the log comes to mind. You may remember the parable. Jesus told those worried about the sinful speck of sawdust in a neighbor’s eye to get rid of the sinful log in their own first. Only, then could they see to lovingly remove the neighbor’s speck.

Our gospel text ends with these words. ***“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be a peace with one another.”***  In other words, live the salt life. Be well seasoned and unique. Preserve the peace and bring healing to a broken world. Be a people of prayer and worship. Do the hard work of self-examination, confess your sin. Put aside your arrogance and judgementalism, be compassionate and full of grace. For your sake, for the sake of a world in need of seasoning and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who lived the perfect salt life, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.