

Sermon Title: The Flavor of the Stew
Text: James 5:13-20, Mark 9:38-50

October 1, 2006
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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For longer than *I've* been a pastor, the first Sunday in October has been set aside for a dual purpose. Some of you remember, but for most of us it's difficult to imagine what the world looked like in 1936, when Presbyterian churches began to set aside the first Sunday in October to observe World Wide Communion, or 1940 when that celebration was adopted by the Federated Council of Churches in America. The drumbeats of war were beginning to pound in Europe, but for the most part America's isolationist longings had been satisfied. It would be a full year and two months after that first ecumenical celebration of the Lord's Table before we would be drawn directly into the conflict, on a day that would "live in infamy."

But the story for the church was quite different. It was something of a golden age of American Protestantism, and the Missionary movements begun toward the end of the previous century were beginning to bear abundant fruit. There was a true and realistic hope that in the course of that generation Christianity in its distinct Western garb would cover the earth, and bring in God's promised reign. The desire for a "world wide communion" reflected the optimism of that church that the missionary mandate would be fulfilled in their lifetime.

Much happened in the next forty years to undermine that hope, and temper its grand expectations. So it takes less imagination to recall 1980, when the two main Presbyterian denominations of the time decided that a special offering should be collected on the first Sunday in October, to enhance the church's work toward peacemaking. The War in Europe had come and gone, along with conflicts in Korea, and skirmishes in nearly every corner of that globe that was to be blanketed by God's protecting love. US involvement in Vietnam was long over, but the Cold War was reaching a frenzied pitch, and the threat of nuclear destruction loomed large.

Talk of the rising influence of new Evangelical churches, and a "Moral Majority" was just emerging on the scene with a presidential election that would be held a month later. We were just starting to wonder just how *mainline* the mainline really was. The desire for a "worldwide communion" sounded far more like a hope than a confidence in that tattered church. It was slowly being recognized that the triumph of western, Protestant mainline Christendom might have meant more to *us* than to God. But that church, set at the seams of the culture wars that were being waged all around, began to understand that if they weren't going to *dominate* the world, they could nonetheless have an *influence* upon it, and if it were faithful, it would be as an agent of peace, reconciliation, and justice.

So much had changed in the years that separate these two headwaters that flow through our worship this morning, and in the quarter of a century since. But they planted a question deep in the heart of the churches that have, for all these seventy years, gathered at this table: how *are* we called to be faithful in this world around us? What does it mean to witness to the world-wide nature of our communion? How is it that *we* are called in *our* time to live out our vocation as members of a worldwide church, and *Peacemakers*?

It's this context, then, that shapes our hearing as we come before Scripture this morning, and a Gospel lesson that sounds something like a leaky faucet if we're perfectly honest. There's little logic that holds the verses from Mark together. The images are a jumble. Perhaps the thing you can see most clearly in the text is why scholars generally agree that there was a source—the "Q Source" they call it, which the authors of the Gospels drew upon. It was not a narrative of Jesus' life, but a stringing together of his earthly sayings. They were linked together for the purpose of memory and not plot, and so link words provide not logical, but a mnemonic—a jog for the memory. While the Gospels as we have them most often cut this "Q source" up into a sequence that at least sounded historical, sometimes it just sort of kept the clump together, and it's one of those "clumps" that claims us this morning.

One of my favorite periodicals, *The Christian Century*, has a running column in which a variety of authors comment on the lectionary readings. For the texts for this morning that commentator is one Stephen Fowl, who teaches theology at Loyola University in Maryland, and has written a book, so he must be a pretty smart guy. But the first paragraph of his article concedes that challenge of this end part of the 9th chapter of Mark. "If you are reading this column hoping to get some insight into Mark 9:49-50, you can stop now," he writes, "These verses are intensely obscure; the commentaries offer little help; neither I nor anyone I know has received a special revelation explaining the text. Let us simply agree to move on to other matters."¹ You know me better than that. It's precisely at the point that you might wonder what sense it all makes that I have most reliably found the Spirit of the Word straining to break through!

What are the verses in question: "For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it has lost its saltiness, how can it season? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." You hear the mnemonic at work? Three distinct sayings, linked together with this notion of salt and saltiness, and connected to what went before by the image of *fire*; linked to the verses that preceded by the notion of "stumbling." How the verses came to be strung together is thus solved. What they have to do with a world-wide witness of Christianity, or our commitment to peace remains.

What prying the text apart like this *does* allow, however, is an insight—maybe a hunch—that somehow salt, and saltiness, were important images for Jesus as to just how he imagined this message of salvation moves and meets the world around it. It was significant enough that each of the Gospel writers had to include it in their telling of Jesus' life. And as I let the image play in my mind, it's that last phrase that I want to cling to, and mull: "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

"You are the salt of the earth," is the way Matthew introduces the same image. And on this world-wide communion Sunday, in a world in which a Gospel of Success nips away at us from the surrounding culture, I remember a lesson I learned early on in the kitchen: a little salt goes a long way, but too much will actually ruin the dish! Curious, isn't it, that Jesus didn't say, "you are the meat and potatoes" the main dish and sustenance on which the world will depend? No, you're the salt—that pinch that is added, but which preserves, and transforms, and brings out the flavor when added in the correct proportion.

¹ Stephen Fowl, "Search and Restore", *The Christian Century*, 123:19. September 19, 2006. P. 19.

Have that salt in yourselves Jesus said. Realize that it's not your place to feed the world, or to make the world after your own image. It's your place to bring out the richness and beauty, the fullness and wonder of what's there by adding just that touch of yourselves. But be careful, because too much and all I'll taste is *you*, and the dish will be spoiled!

I imagine Jesus pushing the image. Salt *makes* you thirsty. It doesn't quench your thirst. And that's your place in this world. It's your job to remind all you meet that what they're really thirsty for isn't anything you can find in yourself, but comes from *me*. What did he say to the woman at the well? "The water I will give will become a spring of a water gushing up to eternal life." Being salty reminds us that what we do in this world will not bring salvation, but what we do just might so transform the world around us that it will wake up to its need, and discover the gifts that God has put before us—within us! —Already.

"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Because that's the way peace will finally reign in this world—not by compressing all the wonderful, diverse complexity God intended for it into a bland porridge of sameness, but precisely as we sprinkle ourselves and let the flavors and savors of the world emerge through contact *with* us. It's not when all the world comes to look and taste and smell like us—that would be lethal! But as we bring out the goodness of God's creation by adding just that pinch we have to offer. That's when peace will prevail on this earth!

As I've thought about it, it's just this dynamic that I think most pleases me about this project that we're celebrating this morning—the collaboration between Memorial, and the Housing Partnership, and Harbor House. Because as I see it, what we did as a congregation was that we saw a place in this world in which God's good gifts were being brought together to truly help people we may never meet, but whose need is greater than we can ever imagine.

We could, I suppose, have tried to do it all on our own...find a building that was suitable, or build it for ourselves. We could have reinvented the programs Harbor House has developed over years of service. And then we could have put our name proudly on top of it all. But that would not have had near the impact we'll have by adding what we have to what God's already been doing. And I know it will go on, as groups of our members join with others to turn these dollars into homes, as our quilters stitch together squares and strips of fabric that will transform bleak hallways into places of welcome, that in their sprinkling of themselves, something will be added to the stew that neither Harbor House nor the Housing Partnership could have found without us.

It is for me a wonderful image of the way God is, indeed, calling us to be in this world at the intersection of World Communion and Peacemaking Sunday. It may not be that Peace will end with a world that looks, and thinks, and acts, and tastes just like me and you, but it does *begin* with you, and me—with *us*, and with all who gather at this table, recognizing that we are not here because we are worthy. We are made worthy because we are here, as salt, as light, as hope for God's love shining through us. Come, taste, and see that the Lord *is* Good; that his faithfulness endures to all generations.

Amen.