

**“Cucumbers, Millstones and Salt”**  
**Pentecost 19 - 9/30/18 – Numbers 11 and Mk 9:38-50**

**This morning's challenge? To think of a food that reminds you of home.** For me, it is my Nana's molasses cookies, big and brown with currants, raisins and nuts. She and I are the only ones who liked them, and if I even smell molasses, I'm right there in her kitchen once more. We all have comfort food, and special smells and tastes that take us back home again. Home is a thread that runs through the stories, and I want to touch on three of them today:

Our Old Testament reading paints a picture of a people yearning to go back. It's the perfect example of what happens at what pastors like to call the *Back to Egypt* committee. That's the committee for people who yearn to go back to the way it was before. Sort of like the Israelites' reverie as they dreamed about cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic! Odd, isn't it? I mean, who longs for veggies?! Who longs to go back to slavery? But, after wandering, even while eating miraculous manna every day, they're past yearning for *food*, they just wanted *home*.

Anyone who has had to wait for a new place to settle in to - whether it's a bigger house or new apartment, assisted living or downsizing - waiting to arrive gets really old after a while. (Just think about those kids in the back seat, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”)

It is interesting that this lament for vegetables happened about two years after their Exodus began with the escape from Egypt. The timing is significant. In the first year of a significant loss (even a loss that results from a good change that you have chosen) the effect of that loss produces a “*manna in the wilderness*” time. At that point, God feeds and nourishes us with just enough to get us through the next day or the next hour.

But by Year Two, we know there is no going back to the way we were. Then, our daily prayers are asking for strength to turn from what's behind us and move toward what lies ahead – even in a wilderness journey, even if we did not choose it. Realistically, nobody likes change, until it becomes “the way we've always done it.” Mostly, we just need God's help finding our way in a new land.

**Fast forward over 1,000 years** to Jesus and his disciples, still sitting in the midst of his disciples, teaching them his final lessons, and holding last week's child on his lap. John “tattles” to Jesus. (Apparently John hasn't learned the difference between good attention and bad attention!) But surprisingly, rather than punishing the non-disciples who dared to cast out demons in Jesus' name, Jesus tells the disciples that the path to belief is different for everyone; and being a bump in their road has dire consequences: including sinking in the sea because of rock around your neck; or cutting off hands or feet or tearing out your eyes!

As Lutherans, you'd think we know how to navigate a new life in a new land. We are historically, and will continue to be, largely a community of immigrants. Adaptation is not our challenge. But sometimes I think we do impede our own path of faith with excuses about quality of our faith. Aren't we constantly placing the obstacles of guilt in our own path because we don't read our Bible enough, or pray enough, we don't worship enough or give enough to God's work? Why do we do that? Do we not feel good enough? Are we not worthy? And how often do those stumbling blocks lead us to decide we might as well not try?

To which Jesus says, (to us, the child in his arms,) “Just stop that. Give yourself a little grace...and then listen to me. Trust me. Follow me.” And there's no time to be wasted - Jerusalem is just around the bend. So, isn't it good to hear Jesus telling all of us that faith is hard? That

everybody struggles with what faith is, so we need to walk together. The Bottom Line? Don't block people's living, growing faith. It's not right; it's not ours to do and it's not what Jesus had in mind.

**What Jesus *did* have in mind was SALT – another miracle food.** Elsewhere, Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth.” You are. So imagine what that means to be salt in the world:

A little bit of salt reduces bitterness, and increases sweet and sour

A lot of salt suppresses sweetness, which enhances savory

***So, you can bring out the best in others!***

Salt slows down a fire and controls the effects of yeast in dough

***So, you can mediate when there is too much or too little***

As salt, you can act as a preservative, or a cleansing agent for a fresh start.

You can be used in the sealing of a covenant (like baptism)

And be the symbol of God's promise to the world.

**Salt is salt. Sodium Chloride. NaCl.** An ionic compound that cannot lose even one tiny ion of its essence and still be salt. So, you might be the common table salt in the blue box with a little girl carrying an umbrella with the slogan, “When it rains, it pours.” Or you may be more like sea salt or kosher salt, black, pink or grey salt. Smoked salt or one of a cornucopia of flavored salts. Just like the myriad followers of Jesus, whom God loves. Everyone brings something to the table in their own unique way.

**S-A-L-T.** Here's a way to remember what Jesus was hoping we would “get” as he moved closer and closer to the cross.

You are **S**ent. You are **A**ble. You can **L**ove. You can **T**ell our story. Finally, imagine your favorite Italian restaurant. Your server starts out by bringing a bottle of fine olive oil and pours it into the dish on the sparkling white tablecloth. Then comes the peppermill and some fresh cracked pepper ground over the oil. Finally, some warm, crusty Italian bread arrives, to be torn apart for dipping.

Now, imagine it is miraculous bread from God, and the fine anointing oil of your baptismal claiming. Add a bit of salt, and *all the world can eat*. So, be salt. Because You are Sent. You are Able. You can Love. You can Tell. We all can be the food that reminds folks of home, their true home in the heart of God. Amen.

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**Resources:** Talitha Arnold, *Day1*; Philip Ruge-Jones for *Working Preacher*; [www.sciencefocus.com](http://www.sciencefocus.com); Rachael Keefe and Karoline Lewis in *The Christian Century*.