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Every time I have moved into a new house or apartment, my mother has given or sent me a very thoughtful, practical and symbolic housewarming gift that is also a traditional blessing. Although it has been featured in old movies and stories and there are various versions of this housewarming blessing, I believe the version my mother prefers might be Irish in origin. Her blessing consists of 3 items:

A loaf of Bread: which symbolizes the hope that those in the house will never know hunger.

A bottle of Wine: symbolizing the hope that joy and prosperity may reign in the household, which is a fancy way of saying may all in the house be of good cheer.

And finally, a container of Salt: which symbolizes the hope that life may always have flavor.

And when it comes to flavor, it is difficult to deny the important role salt plays. A quick glance through any cookbook will prove that one of the most often listed ingredients for any dish whether it's a main course, side dish, vegetable, even dessert, is salt. But salt is rarely the main ingredient. Most often all a recipe calls for is a quarter teaspoon or less. Bakers and cooks know all too well that too much salt can spoil a dish. When it comes to salt, a little goes a long way to enhancing or bringing out the flavors in a meal. Yet, despite that only a small amount is needed, salt is still an important ingredient.

And it has been for centuries. Even back in Jesus' day salt was important and used not only for seasoning, but also the preservation of food. And salt was and still is used in dyeing fabric and leather making. There have even been books written about the importance of salt on human civilizations throughout history, recounting the ways salt has contributed to our way of life.

So it should not surprise us that Jesus referred to salt in today's Gospel and lifted it up as something the disciples needed in their lives as they followed him, at least symbolically, like the blessing my mother always bestows upon me when I move into a new place to live.

Today, the author of Mark's Gospel recounted a time when the disciples told Jesus about how they handled a situation where someone was acting in Jesus' name but wasn't part of their group. They told a man who was casting out demons in Jesus'

name to knock it off, because he wasn't following them. If you remember before this part of Mark's Gospel, Jesus had sent his disciples out to heal and do miracles in his name including casting out demons. But there was one task the disciples had failed to do: cast out demons in Jesus' name. So imagine their jealousy when they discovered some guy who had not been with them, had not seen what they were privileged to see or hear what they were privileged to hear was suddenly going around doing what they had not been able to do. Perhaps they thought this guy was impersonating them. Or trying to make them look bad. Or maybe they were afraid this guy would get Jesus' attention and be lifted up as Jesus' best disciple and usurp their places on Jesus' team. Any of those reasons or a combination of them might be why they told the man able to provide some healing relief to folks being tormented by suffering to stop doing what he was doing. It's hard to imagine they may even have done so in Jesus' own name.

Perhaps one of the most painful parts of today's Gospel is the reminder of the terrible things those of us who follow Jesus do to each other – sometimes even in Jesus' name - because of our own fears, insecurities, and jealousies. Because such actions do not lead to contributing to the miracle of God's Kingdom being present here on earth, like the man who was casting out demons was doing, and instead contributes to further dividing humanity against itself and creates something quite different from God's Kingdom. According to what Jesus says in Mark's Gospel today, it creates hell on earth.

Normally when we hear the word hell, we think of angry preachers yelling about an angry God who can't wait to punish us for the bad things we've done after we die. But that is not what the word meant during the days of Jesus or when the author of Mark wrote this Gospel. The word translated hell is the word Gehenna. It is a word that makes scholars of the Hebrew Bible prick up their ears, because they have heard of it before.

Gehenna was legendary in Jesus time, and not for being a place of punishment in the afterlife. Gehenna was an actual place in this world. It was a valley near Jerusalem, and it was said to be a place where some terrible, ungodly things had taken place. According to the book of Jeremiah, it was in Gehenna that some of the kings of Judea forgot the ways of God and built a temple where they either subjected their own children to the fires of a pagan ritual or some scholars believe they actually sacrificed their children to pagan gods and then burned their corpses. Another story you might hear is that Gehenna was also the location of a garbage heap, where the trash of the ancients was burned, along with the bodies of executed criminals; although there has yet to be any archeological evidence to support the latter story.

Still, in Jesus' day, Gehenna was not just a bad place, it was symbolic of the terrible things humans do to each other when we forget God loves us and God is with us even when life is challenging or frightening. It is what happens when we don't return God's love and do not love our neighbor as ourselves and refuse to respect the dignity of every human being. Gehenna became a place that symbolized what human fears and insecurities and jealousies create and the suffering of the innocent that is the result of such horrible creations.

Which is probably why Jesus responded with such dramatically violent language when the disciples told him what they had done. The disciples seemed pleased with the division they had created, it was this guy against them. And Jesus reprimanded them saying there was no need to create division. The acts the man was doing in Jesus' name were acts that were the same as Jesus' own actions. The man was not causing harm, he was bringing life and freedom to those who were suffering, that's Kingdom of God work. Jesus seemed to indicate the disciples' act of division is what had caused harm. Because it led away from an authentic community of followers of Jesus and toward isolationism and fear.

This section of Mark's Gospel is why I get suspicious when someone tells me there are only two sides to an issue or situation and I must choose one side or the other and then fight for my side and against the other. Because I am concerned about those who are going to get caught in the crossfire. And that is what can lead to the creation of another Gehenna, a hell on earth, where human words and actions intentionally and unintentionally cause suffering and harm out of fear or anger.

But just when it sounded like Jesus was going all Sopranos on his disciples in today's Gospel, he changed his tone and reminded them following him is about having and being salt, being a blessing instead of curse. And sometimes there are followers of Jesus who actually remember that.

Not long ago, there was a town hall meeting in a small town in South Carolina about the concern some residents had about refugees moving into their town, even though at the time of the meeting there were no refugees living there. At the meeting there were businessmen who asked city leaders if any refugees that showed up in their town could be shipped off to another country. They were told no. There were other community members who asked if any refugees who showed up in their town could be forced to leave. They were also told no. One frustrated member of that community is reported to have asked if they weren't going to ship the refugees out of the town was it okay for him to shoot them. Of course, the answer was no. The point is: it didn't take long for the meeting based on so many fears to quickly become a hell on earth

and it would have gotten worse if a Baptist minister hadn't spoken up and said he and several of his church members had taken some special training on how to welcome any refugees should they come to their town.

It was indeed a very small gesture in a town that overwhelmingly did not share the minister's vision. But the minister said if you read the Bible at all, you see we are called by God to welcome the stranger and the vulnerable, and he and a few of his church members intended to do just that. And in that hell on earth, the minister was being salt, he was doing what he could to bring the Kingdom of God into all that fear. No one knows how his statement did or did not affect others in that meeting, but I bet it made a world of difference to any refugees who might have moved into the area, and was at the very least courageous enough to speak against the fears of the majority, to remind them there is another way to live than creating us versus them mentalities rooted in fears that promote violence and harm.

It is very easy to be disheartened when looking at the news and see reports and opinion pieces that seem to push us as a people, a society, and a culture further apart, that create more division and demand sides be chosen, and the flames of fights are fanned, encouraged and instigated. Such an atmosphere makes it hard to notice those who get caught in the crossfire and can make us forget that it doesn't have to be us versus them. It can make us forget we don't have to create hell on earth, we can instead remember our call to have a bit of the salt that is God's love in us and be a bit of salt, to do what we can to keep following Jesus, which means respecting the dignity of every human being, even if it seems small or unimportant, even if all it looks like is a simple refusal to contribute to the divisions of society.

Perhaps it is necessary to remember what makes salt important isn't the amount required, but its presence. Salt doesn't have to be big or large or dominant to be effective. And maybe that is why Jesus said having salt in oneself, just being a ware of God's love and presence, was a way of being at peace in community with each other. Because even in the midst of hell of earth, a little salt can go a long way to bring the flavor of God's Kingdom to life.