

ONE SALTY POPE
Randall Tremba
September 27, 2015
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Mark 9:33-50

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

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The gospel lesson today is troublesome. Jesus threatens hell, for instance, and advocates self-mutilation—pluck out your offending eye, cut off your offending hand and foot. But, then, we know better than to take everything in the Bible *literally*.

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

“Hell” in this lesson is not the hell we picture. The original word behind the word “hell” here is “Gehenna”—the perpetually accursed, smoldering garbage dump in a valley outside the walls of Jerusalem. It was a grim and toxic place, standing as a metaphor for conditions we bring upon ourselves. Personal and political choices can lead to hell on earth.

If your eye is full of lust and greed, pluck it out. It's better to be alive with one eye than rot like garbage. If your hand is stingy and violent, cut it off. Better to be alive with one hand than rot like garbage. And if your foot leads you into wickedness, cut it off. Better to be alive with one foot than rot like garbage.

This, of course, is hyperbole. If we took it literally we'd all be blind amputees. But the message is clear: *if you find yourself abusing or crippling others or yourself, stop it!* Take drastic and decisive action before things get worse. How we act toward others cultivates either heaven or hell on earth. Choices matter.

And then there's this: *If you cause a child to stumble, you're like trash. You should be tossed into the sea with a millstone tied around your neck.*

To which we might say, that's not very nice. Come on, Jesus. Let's be kind.

And finally there's this: *You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, what good is it. Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*

And that brings me to Pope Francis. Today I join the multitudes that sing this salty Pope's praises.

If I could, I'd give him a pat on the back and say, way to go, because he has a long way to go before the Catholic church aligns itself more completely with the whole and holy gospel of Christ. Pope Francis has made a good start. As someone said, he preaches the gospel not the catechism. He lifts up spirit, not law. He practices mercy, not judgment. He smiles. He doesn't scowl.

Our friend Richard Rohr puts it this way: *orthodoxy* (right thinking) matters; but *orthopraxy* (right practice) matters even more.

It matters that this Pope is using his prestige and influence to draw attention to the suffering and wounded multitudes. It matters that he visits inmates in prison and students in impoverished schools. It matters that he eats with homeless people and kisses the face of lepers. It matters that he visits the site where refugees drowned in their

perilous flight to safety. It matters that he decries greed and violence. It matters that he embraces ecological science, not wishful thinking. It matters that he invites hostile nations to come together.

Today I join the multitudes that sing Pope Francis' praises.

But I must confess, I have not always felt congenial about popes.

My father was raised in a German Lutheran family alongside Irish Catholics in a coal-mining township outside Connellsville, PA. My father absorbed the prejudice and bigotry of his family against Catholics.

In my father's eyes, all Catholics were unbelievers and infidels. He warned me against dating Catholic girls, because that could lead to marriage, which was forbidden by the scripture that says: *be not unequally yoked with unbelievers*. And Catholics were most definitely *unbelievers!!*

So, naturally, Catholic girls were all the more alluring. I couldn't resist. In my senior year, I dated a Catholic girl. We thought it was a love that would last forever, a love that would have no end.

And then I went off to college.

In my freshmen year at Wheaton College I took a course entitled: Western Civilization. I read for the first time Martin Luther's 16th century blistering diatribe against the Roman Church and the papacy. Luther convinced me that the Pope was the anti-Christ and over Christmas break I told my Catholic girlfriend so.

She was shocked. And even more shocked when I told her we could not continue our relationship unless she denounced her loyalty to the pope *then and there*.

She didn't. And so we went our separate ways.

That was 50 years ago.

As fate would have it, at my 50th high school reunion earlier this month, my dinner seat was next to her and her devout Catholic husband. That was a bit awkward, but it was all quite pleasant and congenial until she found out I had become a minister in the Presbyterian Church. At that she turned on me and rebuked me for being part of an apostate church that condones same-sex marriage, which, she said, violates God's natural law.

At that point I should have asked her to dance. But, of course, I didn't. I'm not that courageous or gracious.

People change. Institutions change. Churches change.

You are the salt of the earth, said Jesus. But if salt loses its saltiness, what then? It's worthless.

Salt accentuates flavors. Salt heals wounds. Salt preserves. Salt prevents spoiling. And salt makes soil infertile for a hundred years.

You are the salt of the earth. Accentuate the earth's diverse and varied flavors. Heal its wounds. Preserve its goodness. Prevent spoiling. Render evil infertile. That's the church's calling.

Yes, we can be like salt for the world. But we often stumble. We lose our distinctive way of being in the world, of walking and being the way of love.

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little children who trusts in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

Yes, the Roman church has stumbled badly. It's not the only one. Children have been abused and scarred. And this salty Pope knows it and admits it and longs for mercy, one of his favorites words. He even turns "mercy" into a verb. May you be *mercied*, he often says.

May mercy prevail in the church and in the world. May the Roman church and all churches including our own find its way back—time and time again. And may the church reclaim its calling to be salty, to be a servant and not a lord.

None of us have the Pope's prestige, influence or power. But we do have enough power in our own small worlds to tend the wounded and suffering nearby.

We are not called to be sugar. We are not called to be comfortable. We are not called to be selfish or self-indulgent. We are called to be salty servants of love.

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Hymn 727

"Will You Let Me Be Your Servant"