

Fire, Salt, and a Cup of Water
Mark 9:38-41, 50; James 5:13-16; Psalm 124

Psalm 124

¹If it had not been the Lord who was on our side—let Israel now say—
²if it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
 when our enemies attacked us,
³then they would have swallowed us up alive,
 when their anger was kindled against us;
⁴then the flood would have swept us away,
 the torrent would have gone over us;
 ⁵then over us would have gone the raging waters.
⁶Blessed be the Lord,
 who has not given us as prey to their teeth.
⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
 the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
⁸Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

James 5:13-20

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴²“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

⁴³If 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.

⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.

⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹“For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt 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.”

The Sermon

When David Letterman retired earlier this year, a lot of media outlets went over the timeline of his career, and most agreed there was a real turning point for him when he had to miss several months of hosting the Late Show due to a complicated heart surgery.

A lot of people remember Letterman's bandleader and sidekick Paul Schaffer. Not as many people know that Paul Schaffer is a devout Orthodox Jew.

In his memoirs, Paul Schaffer said the first thing he did when he found out Dave was going to need a quadruple bypass was call the chief rabbi of the state of Israel to ask for a *mi shabeirach*, a special prayer for healing, for Dave.

The rabbi said, "Is he Jewish?"

And Paul said, "No, but he's in show business."

And the rabbi said, "Close enough!"ⁱ

A few years ago I had a short sabbatical, during which time I attended as many worship services I could get to, some in interfaith circumstances, and a lot in different kinds of churches. I especially craved as much holy communion as I could get.

One thing I experienced over and over was going as a guest to other churches who celebrated communion, and finding in their literature the rule that if you weren't part of that specific faith family, you weren't supposed to take communion. That theme continued to pop up all the way to the very last day of my sabbatical, when I slipped into a gorgeous and soul-lifting service at a Greek Orthodox church and, even though it was not a communion service, I came across those words in print somewhere and I thought, you know, I am just sick and tired of reading that message—"this is not for you"—among fellow Christian disciples in their houses of worship.

I didn't just want a blessing over my politely folded arms; I needed the bread and wine. I need the body and the blood. And just when I needed it the most—the nourishment, the encouragement, the strength in the name of Christ to go and engage with the world, just when I was starving for it, they'd tell me that they had it, but it wasn't available to me.

On that final sabbatical day as on several before, I remembered with gratitude a short retreat in which the list of participants was 70 Catholic laypeople, one priest, and one Presbyterian minister who stuck out like a sore thumb but was warmly embraced anyway.

On the last night, they were going to celebrate the mass, so I stole a quick moment with the priest to ask if he would prefer that I not put him in an awkward position by coming forward to receive the sacrament.

(Professional courtesy.)

And I remember a look on his face that kind of said, “We’re going to make this work,” and after about half a second of consideration, he said, “Do you believe that Christ is in some sense present in the bread and wine?” And I said, “Absolutely.”

And that was it. I was firmly instructed to take communion with everybody else.

“Is he a Catholic?” No, but he believes Christ is in the bread and wine. *Close enough!*

“Teacher,” they said, “we saw somebody casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

And Jesus said, in Eugene Peterson’s translation,

“Don’t stop him.

“No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down.

“If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally. Anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it that God will notice.”ⁱⁱ

We find ourselves at a historical point where much about the way we understand Church, including church affiliation, will be radically different—though we don’t even know how.

Mark’s story about anxious disciples coming to Jesus to warn him that someone from outside the recognized parameters of the church family was acting in the name of Jesus, is a reminder that if we believe God’s promises, we don’t have to be afraid of this historical crossroads for the church.

A long time ago, I stumbled onto a clarification of terms that has shaped my religious thinking ever since. The terms are these: when you are talking about the area that an animal will roam, there is its *range*, and its *territory*.

An animal's *range* is the total area that it will travel. It may be just going out to explore, or to look for food, or a mate, or watch for potential rivals. No matter what for, the farthest extent of the area that an animal will travel of its own will is called its range.

An animal's *territory* is closer in; it's the area it will defend. They mark their territory, and patrol it, and if some other animal violates that territory—as in, “forgive us our trespasses”—you will get, at the very least, a growl to tell you to back off, because the next thing that happens is going to be a lot worse.

An animal's *range* is the total area that it will travel. An animal's *territory* is the area it will defend.

The Church in all its expressions is going to have to learn how to become more and more comfortable with disciples expanding their range, and—I would imagine—probably will have to become less and less possessive about its territory.

Individual Christians have always had differences in terms of their range, how far out they will wander—in terms of how far they will trust their *faith* to take them, but also how far they're willing to go as theologians; how far away from the faith they were taught in church as children, or from a slam-bang conversion experience when they hardly knew anything about it at all.

Right now, the Church is in the midst of great anxiety over the changing face of Christianity in the demographics of our country and the world.

Some of that anxiety sounds less like a community of people gathered around their trust in the God who, generation after generation, has led God's covenant people through desert and wilderness to salvation,

and more like the anxieties of a consumer-oriented marketplace.

And when churches focus on surviving in the marketplace rather than trusting and following wherever God leads them,

they can end up offering, what Kenda Creasy Dean calls “a kind of ‘diner theology’: a bargain religion, cheap but satisfying, whose gods require little in the way of fidelity or sacrifice.

“Never mind that centuries of Christians have read Jesus’ call to lay down one’s life for others as the signature feature of Christian love (John 15:13), or that God’s self-giving enables us to share the grace of Christ when ours is pitifully insufficient.

“Diner theology,” says Dr. Dean, “is much easier to digest than all this—and it is far safer, especially for malleable youth. So who can blame churches, really, for earnestly ladling this stew into teenagers, filling them with an agreeable porridge about the importance of being nice, feeling good about yourself, and saving God for emergencies?”ⁱⁱⁱ

A little later she asks,

“What if the church models a way of life
that asks not passionate surrender, but ho-hum assent?
What if we are [just] preaching moral affirmation,
a feel-better faith, and a hands-off God,

instead of the decisively involved,

impossibly loving,
radically sending God of Abraham and Mary,
who desired us enough
to enter creation in Jesus Christ
and whose Spirit is active
in the church and in the world today?”^{iv}

What happens, I would say, is that our anxiety goes up even further,
because we know we are not really serving or teaching God,
and we’re left feeling—appropriately—empty and compromised.

And the people who want to follow Jesus

but are not at all sold on the Church
find us, and our mission, and our message
the worst thing that these generations can find something,
which is *inauthentic*.

If we are going to be authentic, in our message and in who we are—if we are going to have any salt within ourselves—we are going to have to learn to entrust the Church back to God, as faithfully as God has entrusted it to us.

And I ask myself as I invite you to ask yourself: Can you do that? Do you trust God with the church that you have worked so painstakingly to make as secure as possible?

To trust God that much means that a lot of things that I've taken for granted in the Church—things that we have known to be tremendously effective—may not be part of our landscape going forward.

It may mean that what it means to be part of the Church will be very different from what I am used to.

I'm not saying I'm comfortable with that. I'm saying that trusting God means I will follow this awesome Christ when he expands my range further out than I have been willing to go.

I have to look in the mirror and give serious thought to how much I trust God, when God says to throw open the doors,
and Jesus calls us out of the sanctuary and into the world,
and the Spirit gives us a vision that says,
“What God has made clean,
you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15).

And I say, “Yeah, but we have the Church, and the Spirit has acted upon the Church, and the Church is Reformed and always being reformed, by You. So if someone is out there claiming to follow you, the way that is confirmed is by being part of the body of Christ, right? And there are excellent reasons to be part of this body of Christ...right?”

And Jesus says: “Do not stop that person. Whoever is not against us is for us. Have salt in yourself. And you can all be at peace with one another.”

Don't you dare, he said, put a stumbling block in the way of somebody else who follows Jesus, just because they don't want to follow Jesus the way you follow Jesus.

You worry about you. Have salt in yourself.

How far out will you follow this man?

How far out past the territory you know, and will defend?

He said, “Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink *on the basis of belonging to Christ*” will by no means lose the reward.”

What do you think that cup of water meant to him?

All those Old Testament stories where a parched traveler asked for a cup of water; all those stories of the Covenant People complaining about not having enough, and God providing *a drink of water* in a parched land.

Does the Church in you still know what it means to give a fellow traveler, or to receive from a kind person, a cup of water?

Lucimarian Roberts wrote a book of memoirs a few years ago called *My Story, My Song*, in which she remembered being part of the only non-white household on a military base where her husband worked, and the unkindnesses great and small that she and her family ran into every day. She wrote,

“The family who lived behind us on the base had a birthday party for their daughter in the backyard area we neighbors all shared. Every child on base was invited, every child except [my] Sally-Ann. It was a heartbreaking scene, watching her disappointment as she looked out the window to see other children gathering without her.

“While the party was in progress, a white Norwegian woman was helping me clean the windows of our home. A few days later, the neighbor who’d hosted the party noticed my sparkling windows. When she saw the [Norwegian] woman working outside my home, the neighbor came over to ask if she had a day that she could clean the windows of her home.

“The Norwegian woman frowned, put her hands on her hips, and spoke to my neighbor with a thick accent and serious tone. ‘If I had any days, I wouldn’t give them to you! Not after what you did to my little one.’”

She wrote, “I have a feeling my neighbor was shocked to hear the woman refer to Sally-Ann as her little one. Even so, the reprimand must have pricked my neighbor’s conscience. She eventually apologized for her thoughtlessness. Though I was grateful for her apology, my daughter’s heart had already been broken.”^{vi}

Kenda Dean also said, “In the practice of hospitality, God sends me to strangers in the name of Jesus Christ, who calls me to recognize God’s image in them and, because we share divine parentage, to acknowledge them—in all their glorious strangeness—as my brothers and sisters.”^{vii}

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,” said Jesus,

“If your hand causes you to stumble, if your foot causes you to stumble, if your eye causes you to stumble, it’d be better for you not even to have them—rather than holding onto all of that which has caused you to be so sinful, and be condemned for it.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost the essence of what makes it salt, how can you season it?”

“Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

What if we throw our church doors wide open,
wider than we are accustomed,
wider than maybe we have imagined;
maybe even so wide that they don’t even look like doors anymore.

What if our church doors are open as wide as Jesus’ arms were when he reached out for you and for me,

and what if we share with everyone who is thirsty
the same cup of water that gives us life—

even we who are still exploring the outer reaches of our range,
even we who still struggle with our anxieties
about the territory we defend?

If God wants the Church to survive, God will make it so—in spite of our best efforts.

Can we do this? Can we entrust the future of the church to God?

How deep is our trust? How deep is our faith? How deep is God's love?

*If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone the raging waters.*

Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

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ⁱPaul Schaffer, *We'll Be Here for the Rest of Our Lives*. New York: Anchor, 2009; pp. 296-297.

ⁱⁱEugene Peterson's translation of Mark 9:39-41 in the MSG Bible (*The Message*).

ⁱⁱⁱKenda C. Dean, *Almost Christian*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; Chapter 1.

^{iv}*Ibid.*

^vThis is the translation preferred by Hammond & Busch, editors of the Norton Critical Edition of *The English Bible: The New Testament and The Apocrypha*. New York: Norton, 2012; p. 103 (n. Mark 9:41).

^{vi}Lucimarian Roberts, *My Story, My Song*. Upper Room, 2012; p. 51.

^{vii}Kenda C. Dean, *Almost Christian*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.