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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA 22310  
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Psalm 124  
Mark 9:38–50

## **SALT-OF-THE-EARTH CHRISTIANS**

Jesus wanted his disciples to hear his message. It was a message of God's saving love for them and for all humanity. He wanted his disciples to understand and internalize the complete divinity of this love—the nature of His coming in their midst. He wanted his disciples to hear and understand that all God was doing could be experienced in their relationship with him.

To hear—to take it in—but recognize that it was completely other than themselves. You see, if we are in a relationship with Jesus, then and only then can we know without any doubt that he lived on this earth as an ordinary human being, but his existence was anything but ordinary. He was and is the extraordinary expression of God in the flesh. Earlier in this chapter, Mark does something very similar. Mark tells the disciples in Jesus own words that Jesus must live and die and be raised from the dead. And then right after that, Jesus goes up on a hill and is transfigured—that very strange story that is hard to understand, even for pastors.

I finally have a hint. I finally have just an inkling of what it could possibly mean. You see, to hear that Jesus will live and die and rise again, and that this same Christ wants to be in a relationship with me and you, requires a transfiguring of everything that I know and see. Everything has to take on that new hue and brightness. Everything that has to do with faith really does have to be coming from Christ and, therefore, beyond my ability to comprehend—supernatural, and yet here in the flesh.

Now we read this very strange story of Jesus talking with his disciples, and they tell him of the supernatural happening outside the jurisdiction that they have established. Jesus tells him the opposite of what we would conclude. Did you hear him? He said a very counterintuitive thing. For the world's culture and the climate of the world today: if you're not for us, you're against us. Yet that is exactly the opposite of what Jesus teaches. He is saying if you are not against us you're for us. We would never conclude that. We're just not that trusting, are we? And yet it's because of our limited power that we don't understand.

Just a few very short verses after this, along comes a blind man named Bartimaeus. He will seek healing and the disciples will try to stop him because they don't understand that the living, and dying, and the rising again—that the supernatural nature of Jesus Christ in their presence is there even for this troublesome blind man. Jesus died for you and for me. But without his help, we will either misunderstand or reject what that means.

Jesus died for you and for me, and with his help, we can live in response to a truth that goes beyond our circumstances, beyond our inability to see or comprehend. But we have a problem. We take this very simple truth: Jesus dies for us, for one another, for the whole world; then he rose again; and the meaning of that death and that resurrection can be experienced in a relationship with Christ and with one another. We take that very simple truth and we add to it all sorts of orthodox practices, like the disciples tried to do. To say, hey, they're not following us, we need to discredit them and put them at arms' length. We need to exclude them. Their practice might not be what you have taught us to practice. Let's be careful. I have said the same thing two different times—the same sequence of events.

Let me try another tack. An epic poem. A poem that was written by Dr. Seuss for the graduating class in 1977 from Lake Forest University in Chicago, Illinois. And let's try it the way we did a few months ago: I'll read a line, and you repeat the line. (And I cheated; some of you have the poem in your hand. I went to some of the younger Sunday School classes.) The poem is entitled "My Uncle Terrwilliger: On the Art of Eating Popovers."

*My uncle ordered popovers  
from the restaurant's bill of fare  
And when they were served, he regarded them  
with a penetrating stare.  
Then he spoke great words of wisdom  
as he sat there on that chair  
To eat these things, said my uncle,  
you must exercise great care  
You may swallow down what's solid, but ...  
you must spit out the air.*

When we are served the truth of the gospel, I wonder how many times we fail to truly internalize its life-changing impact for us. What is our practice of faith that is more than hot air? What is it about us that is greater than any pretense we might assemble? We are genuine and useful to God when we take the message of Jesus Christ and it so becomes our own that we can do nothing other than teach it to our children—we can do so not only with our words but with our actions. And this is what happens every day in our Day School. Every day, children are taught to share. They are taught that it is Jesus' love that guides them. They are taught that we want to be a part of what God is doing.

Did you sing that first response? Not God, you're going my way ... but, I'm going your way. Yes. It's fun and exciting to come to Bush Hill Day School. And that's what God intended for all of faith to be. Our journey is to be about what is most precious and exhilarating in all this world. Maybe we should do more simple crafts. You know, the kindergarten crafts that hang on the Christmas tree you realize, as you get older, are more valuable to you than any crystal ornament you could ever purchase.

The simple lessons—the little lessons that go with us keep us more than we keep them.

They are the ones that are most valuable. The church has a long history of struggling with hot air. At one point, we said there could be no truth outside the church. Jesus reminded us that he was still divine—still working in places that we didn't recognize. And then we said, we've got the truth, and if you come here, we'll help you discern it and we'll use the scientific method to help you replicate it in your own life. Jesus said science is my gift. Don't think you can control me with your science.

And then we said, of late, you know it doesn't matter what you believe or what you think; just come, because Jesus is everywhere and in everything. So you can come and believe anything you want. The gospel of Mark says to us this morning Jesus was alive; he died and he rose again for us. And the only way to discover that is in a relationship with Christ; but, never forget in that relationship, Jesus is Jesus. We only can reflect his love in the way we are in a relationship with one another. Don't try to out God, God.

Don't try to be that perfect expression of Jesus Christ by yourself. The only way to be that perfect love for our world is by being together; and then to fill in the gaps where I fall short, and I think the thoughts that may have slipped by, and another person remembers the love when there is hatred, and finally we recognize what's solid in the faith. We let go of what's pretense—no matter what year it is, or what fad it is, or what era. The truth of Jesus Christ never changes—we know that—when Jesus knows us completely.

So may it be, this Day School Sunday and every day in the walls in this holy place and beyond. Amen.