Text: Mark 9:49-50, Numbers 18:8-20, Rev 2:1-7

**Introduction**

When I first saw the theme of the conference – “Forever Reforming” – I was intrigued. I was intrigued because I immediately thought of *semper reformanda*, the Reformed slogan, or maybe I should say the neo-Reformed slogan. My time at Grove City – Calvinist Hot Bed – would tell me that it goes back to the late 1600. More recently is comes from Karl Barth, and through Barth it even found its way into the Second Vatican Council document Lumen Gentium. Depending upon your church politics, I’ve probably either just hit every bogeyman, or every hero of the past 400 years.

The phrase at the level of common sense is obviously true. Even God moved from Hebrew to Greek. Part of that word given to us says that the Spirit will guide you into all truth. Being creatures that reflect the image of a creator God, we are constantly creating. And in creating also destroying. And in all that change, the church itself changes.

The real question, the church political heat, is how and what changes. Call me crazy, join the line that I’m sure is forming to come get me, I don’t think you can read Luther deeply and not realize he was more comfortable with more change – at least in theory – than we probably are. A good place to start in that if you are interested is to read Dr. Robinson on Luther’s essay On the Councils of the Church. But at the same time that Luther is more open to Forever Reforming, I think it is fair to say that Luther is much more intransigent about a subset of things. This is the guy who banged on the table about the word “est”.

**Trouble in the World**

The world is always full of trouble and challenge. Trouble and challenge that we are called to meet in some form. The thing that called out the unique problem that we are called to meet – or I should say crystalized it for me – was a graph by a Dr Ryan Burge. He’s a Baptist minister and a college prof at Easter Illinois, so an interesting duck. And the graph that he made had taken GSS – The General Social Survey, the companion to the census – he took GSS data which has both questions on church attendance and certain theological or metaphysical beliefs. And it’s got this data for quite a long period of time. What Dr. Burge had done was shown what three groups believed in 1990 and compared that to right now. The three groups were “every Sunday attenders”, “monthly attenders” and “rarely”. And what it showed, which conformed to by experience and intuition, was that in 1990, attendance had some impact on general beliefs, but not as much as you’d think. My guess is that if you pushed that back further in time, you’d find even more solidarity. The people scare-quotes “outside” the church really didn’t have vastly different beliefs that they could express. They might have been expressing those different beliefs in actions, but not in words. And when asked, the old “correct” answers were at hand. Fast forward to today. The “every Sunday” bar had barely changed. But both the “monthly” and the “never” had changed dramatically. Someone who never attended in 1990 was closer to the every Sunday answers, than the monthly today was. So, extrapolate that into your congregations and circuits, in people sitting in the pews monthly. And the never today might as well have been a foreign country. Which we live in the midst of, and might not know it. The deeper reason for the polarization.

My unbidden and intuitive response was simply, “I guess the church is going to learn what it means to be salty again.”

We might talk about reformation or forever reforming, but unless you want to translate metanoia – repentance, turning around – as reforming, that is a word that is not in the Bible. Look for it, it’s not. That is a church-y institutional word. No, I think the words that he bible uses – for what we are talking about, being called to be different - are Salt and Love.

**Trouble in the Text**

I picked the text from Mark 9 because it is the most hopeful expression of the saying. If you are on the three year cycle – the Matthew parallel comes up in a couple of weeks – Epiphany 5. You can check my work, or trust me and run with it. But there, and in Luke, the saying is used in the context of discipleship. At the end of the beatitudes, and to conclude the parable of the man building a tower. The question comes across with rhetorical force. How can it me made salty again? It can’t. And that isn’t really implied, because Jesus continues in both places to talk about it being thrown out.

**Gospel in the Text**

But Mark uses the saying differently. It follows not hard-core anxious bench type teaching on discipleship, but it follows temptations to sin. Now Jesus’ advice about those temptations is rather hard core – “cut it off”. But then we have our short text. Everyone will be salted with fire.

Which I gloss with Luther’s – prayer, study and trial. Everyone passes through the trial. Every disciple worth his salt, finds his salt, in the test of the trial. In being different than the world. In being a living offering.

And if you lose that salt?

Mark does not talk about it being thrown out. But simply proclaims, “have salt in yourselves”. How do we get salt in ourselves? We take it in from outside of us. It comes to us in Word and Sacrament. The Salt of Christ is given to us as we take it in through the ears and through the mouth and through the skin. Which is the necessity of the second half of the phrase unique to Mark – “be at peace with one another.” We have grown too individual. And we often demand that uniqueness from each other – or cut off people because of some uniqueness. We refuse to be at peace with each other.

How are we made salty again? It sure as hell is not by doubling down on the cost of discipleship. Trying harder just leads to sweat. And sweat moves the salt out of the body. The more we get in pissing matches with each other, the more salt that goes out.

This point of including the Revelation reading. We’d all like that call to Ephesus. Who is kidding who. If we saw a church that did everything Jesus lists – your works, your toil and your patient endurance…their testing of false apostles…their bearing up in persecution. These are the heroes of sweat.

Yet Jesus tells them to return to their first love. To see from where they have fallen, and do the works they did at first. And what are those first works? Look it up, Acts 19. They had been baptized into the baptism of John. And when Paul came he immediately baptized them in the name of Jesus. And they gathered daily with Paul for two years. “So that all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord.” The Love they had at first? The Works they did first? Word and Sacrament.

How are we made salty? Word and Sacrament.

**Application**

And just like given to Aaron, this has been given to you. This is a covenant of salt forever. For you and your offspring with you. (Be they physical or spiritual offspring.)

As the called and ordained servants of Christ, you have been given charge of all the consecrated things of the people of Israel.

For a long time the church has attempted to live not by her salt – word and sacrament – but by an ever shrinking portion of the land. Whether as Princes of the Church or Lord’s Spiritual. Whether as those due tithes or called rabbi – Herr Pastor – Monsignor – Father – Rev. Dr. – add your favorite. For a long time we’ve tended to claim a portion of the land as our inheritance.

But that is not our inheritance. The Lord is our portion and our inheritance.

He’s given us all the salt we need to mix into all the earth.

Everything else, we can work through it. It will change. It will reform. And we’ll make some stupid mistakes. We’ll sweat out a bunch of salt. Probably piss a bunch as well. We might even reform the wrong things and have to be always reforming.

But return to your first love. Replenish your salt. Have salt within yourselves. The Gifts are in the feast. They who trust with faith unshaken by their God are not forsaken. It is a covenant of salt. Amen.