

Hearing and Listening

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

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The lectionary Gospel passage for today is in two parts: Matthew 13:1-9 and 18-23. The first part is Jesus telling the parable of the sower, and the second part is Jesus explaining the parable of the sower. However, the context in which Jesus tells this parable is important. He has been gathering disciples and going around the region healing and teaching and, most of all performing miracles and casting out demons. At the end of chapter 12, right before this reading, Jesus' mother Mary and his brothers have come to get Jesus and take him home, because they thought he was not well. There is a lot of interest in this new spiritual teacher. This is Jesus most noteworthy parable, because it is one he explains in detail. Not only has that, with this parable, Jesus taught them WHY he taught in parables. So, I am going to divide the reading into two segments of my sermon, instead of reading the whole thing now.

Before I read, I want you to imagine that you are among the crowds who have come to listen to this new teacher. People were crowding around Jesus waiting to hear something profound. Imagine if you were listening to Jesus and hearing this teaching for the first time. What would you think of it? Listen for the Word of God: Matthew 13:1-9 (read)

If I were there, I would have thought. Well, that is nothing special. Every spring I see people sowing their fields. They work to make a clear and fertile field. But as the farmer goes about casting the seeds, of course not all will land in the plowed ground, you can't help that. There are birds and weeds everywhere. What is this guy talking about? There is nothing special or spiritual about sowing seeds, is there? One of the frustrating things about Jesus teaching in parables is that he doesn't teach the crowds what he means by these parables. All he does is to start and end his parable with a command to listen.

In the meanwhile, before Jesus teaches them the meaning; in Matthew 13 10-17, Jesus disciples ask him WHY he uses parables to teach followers about the kingdom of God.

A parable is rather unique to Jesus. It is unlike a fable, like Aesop used. A fable uses elements of nature, but humanizes them in order to produce a moral. Like the fable of the rabbit and the tortoise. They enter into a race, which a tortoise and a hare would probably not do in real life. The hare bolts ahead, gets tired and takes a

nap. The tortoise keeps walking, and in the end wins the race because of his perseverance. Slow and steady wins the race. Aesop uses animals to portray human experiences and truths. Mths tell about gods and goddesses and why things happened. But Parables are the method unique to Jesus as a way to speak and teach about spiritual things.

In parables, Jesus uses human experiences to portray truths about God. Perhaps that is why we have a difficult time understanding the parables. We can understand the truths about human behavior, but it is often hard to see signs of God in our behaviors.

Because which one of us is like the Good Samaritan who would stop and help a foreign stranger, and pay for his care? Which of us would welcome home a child who already demanded his inheritance and went and wasted it all? Who would sell everything to get one pearl? Who can see God in a farmer spreading seed in a field?

Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 13:13: The reason I speak in parables is that “seeing, they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”

Jesus is saying that we can discern spiritual things in life, if we can listen, hear and understand with our spiritual self.

One of the clues we get is what Jesus says to the crowd at the end of this parable. He says: “Let anyone with ears, listen.”

If we were a part of that crowd, we might have said to ourselves: “I have ears, here they are right on the side of my head. I heard what he said. But that does not mean I understand anything except that he was talking about some farmer scattering seeds.”

Well, there is our first inkling that Jesus is not only talking about seeds and dirt and weeds and birds. Yes, we all have ears, but do we all listen? Can we listen if we can't hear? I have a particular sensitivity about this parable because my oldest niece is deaf. She has ears, but she cannot hear. But that does not mean she cannot listen, or learn. She has learned other ways to “listen” and to communicate and to understand the things that people are speaking to her. At our 10:00 service, we have a perfect example of different ways of hearing, in that we have a sign language interpreter for anyone who wishes to listen but cannot hear, and we have headsets for those who wish to hear better.

Hearing and listening are two different things in our human communications. I remember an experience I had with my daughter when she was quite small. She was going out to play in the field of grass around my parents' house, and I told her to stay away from the tall grass at the edge because there was poison ivy there. Of course, she went in and got poison ivy. I said to her, "Didn't you listen to me when I told you about the poison ivy? Yes, mommy, she replied, but I didn't hear you."

Jesus tells his disciples that he teaches in parables in order to fulfill especially what God said to Isaiah about what will happen when he prophesies: "they have shut their eyes, so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn-and I would heal them." God wants us to study the Word of God, to listen to it, and to respond to it.

In the second half of the Gospel reading for today, Jesus explains to his disciples the spiritual teaching that he was trying to convey in his parable. This explanation is important because it is one of the few parables that Jesus DID explain.

Listen for the Word of God as I read the second part of today's Gospel passage: Matthew 6: 19-23 (read).

The seed which is sown is the word of God: all that we are reading and thinking about today. The types of ground are the different hearers of the Word: you and me.

The quality of the ground describes all the things which keep us from hearing. But notice that there can be a response to the word when someone hears it. Because, for Jesus, as well as for any good farmer, the real purpose of sowing seeds is to have them live: to put down roots, grow, multiply and make more seed and feed for the year ahead.

But it is the quality of the ground which determines the possibility for the seeds. Hardness and thorns and birds are enemies of seeds. It is something we see in the world. But is it something we see in our hearts? The kind of ground necessary to grow the seeds of God's kingdom is ground which has been cultivated, prepared and nurtured. That is the kind of ground which produces many multiples of growth.

What Jesus does in using parables and explaining them is that he gives us permission to see examples of his teaching and of his kingdom in the parables of the world around us. Don't we marvel at a rainbow, which is a parable of God's covenant with us?

Hymns have been written on parables of both sowing and harvesting. We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by thine almighty hand.

By using parables, Jesus encourages us to “listen” to what is happening around us. If I were to expand a little on this parable of Jesus, I would say that the field which is most ready is the field which has been cultivated. In other words, its dirt has been dug up and turned over. Lots of good manure has been added and folded in furrows and lines have been dug, and then it’s ready for the seed to grow. Being a cultivated field may mean suffering and dealing with the fertilizer of life.

So often, God works manifold miracles in the lives that have had the most tragedy and struggle. A hard life can either harden our heart, or soften us with mercy for others. Think of the thorns of life, how worries can distract us from faith and trust in the lord, choke out any sense of light and hope. But how great it is when our faith is strong enough to cut the briars and clear out the stones which get in the way.

In this teaching Jesus asks his hearers, he asks us, to listen.

And for Jesus, I think that listening to his parables means that we see ourselves in them. Listening to the parables means that we can hear that they are about our spiritual journey and searching. Listening to them means that they are more than a primer on good gardening soil, they are a lesson in how we so often respond to the work of God on our heart.

Listening AND hearing. The only way we know if we have done either of those is if we respond. Bearing fruit is the goal of Jesus’ teaching. Receiving the word, letting it sink in, and responding: this is why Jesus taught in parables, so that we could “see” using more than our eyes and “listen” using more than our ears and loving using more than just our heart, but our hands and feet and money too. Listening means we live the parable. In Jesus’ name. Amen