

Sermon for Sunday, July 16, 2017

LISTEN!

I imagine it was a horribly hot and humid day—like we suffered through this last week—when Jesus addressed the crowds next to the Sea of Galilee. But the crowd that came to hear him was overwhelming in spite of the oppressive heat. The word about him had gotten around. He'd had his share of setbacks: conflicts with the Pharisees, rejection in a number of towns including his hometown, doubts from John the Baptist about whether he really was the Messiah and charges that he was in league with Beelzebul. But there at the water's edge, the disappointments faded as the crowd began to swell beyond his wildest expectations. In fact they so pressed in upon him that he got in a boat just off shore so he could speak and be seen.

"Listen!" he shouted, and the crowd grew quiet, waiting expectantly for a sampling of his teaching. "A sower went out to sow..."

It was another parable, the unique form in which Jesus always couched his message. In fact, that day he told the people many parables, many stories that spoke of life but that only tangentially spoke of faith or of God. Why did Jesus do that? Why didn't he speak plainly? Why was his message always hidden in these parables, which confuse at least as much as they clarify, and which hide almost as much as they disclose? Was he just trying to obscure his message from the unfaithful, to save it for those who were serious enough to put some real effort into grasping it? Perhaps, but that doesn't fit with Jesus' desire to save the lost. He wouldn't deliberately try to confuse people. Are the parables a clever way to cure our deafness to his message, that by engaging our minds with memorable stories and vivid images from daily life, we would hear better? Maybe, but we don't hear better. Instead of answering our questions, parables often create more.

What we do know is that Jesus communicated with parables for a reason, and that reason has to do with our inability to hear and believe the gospel of God. He didn't use parables to confuse us, or to cure our deafness, but to make us aware of the blindness already in our hearts, a blindness of the human spirit that prevents us from really embracing the gospel of God.

Parables, when we are unable to understand them, confront us with a choice. Either there is something wrong with Jesus as a communicator, or there is something wrong with us as listeners. Or put another way, either we have been mistaken in identifying Jesus as the Messiah, or else we need to figure out why we can't understand what the Messiah is saying.

Communication, we know, is a receiver phenomenon. What constitutes it, is not what a person says, but what the listener hears. If I blame Jesus for not speaking clearly, I have decided that the world revolves around me and my view of things. I judge reality based upon my unique perspective and judge Jesus accordingly to be a fraud. When Jesus fails to tell me what I want to hear, what little faith I have that he might be the Messiah, is taken away.

But if I trust that Jesus is the Messiah, and approach Jesus from the perspective of faith in him, I will blame myself for not hearing clearly. I will begin to search for those things in me that prevent me from understanding Jesus, and that limit my ability to be open to the gospel. It is precisely to generate this kind of self-examination that Jesus speaks in parables. His parables are an invitation to reconsider one's commitments, and one's preparedness to receive the gracious gift of the kingdom of heaven.

Yet also, any time we think that the gospel is a message of words to be heard, we misunderstand it. The gospel is not a message or words, nor is it a compendium of wisdom to be known or understood. The gospel is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate. He is not simply the messenger; he is the message. When we understand this, through believing in him, we do not abandon him as a bad communicator. Instead, we keep paying attention to him, we keep following him, and we keep listening to him, because we know he is the answer.

So, truth be told, we know why Jesus spoke in parables, and what the function is of the parable of the Sower. For those who have decided that the failure to comprehend Jesus' teaching lies in themselves, that is, have resolved the dilemma in the direction of faith, the parable of the Sower stands as an invitation and guide

to a process of self-examination that leads to repentance and renewed discipleship. It is a guide to the impediments that stand in the way of truly hearing and responding to Jesus as the Christ.

The parable of the Sower suggests to us first of all, that faith, whether it's received gradually or in a flash of comprehension, grows and matures, because it's a relationship. It starts small, no more than just a seed, and then it sprouts, matures, and produces the fruit of love and justice in us, and through us. It's why we engage in worship, Bible study, fellowship, church school and adult education throughout our lives. Those activities fertilize our faith with God's word, help us establish roots in God's love, help us stand firm in the storms of life, and produce a bountiful harvest of joy and thanksgiving. But any gardener knows that the secret to effective growth, and a good harvest, is good soil. Jesus tells us what faith needs to take root in us, and invites us to examine the quality of the soil of our hearts.

You know how it goes. Some hearts are like beaten paths, hard and unyielding. They are either too self-centered to really listen to God, or too armored against any more pain and suffering to trust in anyone, divine or not. They think the problem is in Jesus not in themselves. So they doubt Jesus' claims. It's not the doubt that is the impediment to growth; it is the unyielding heart. Psychologists know that empathy, the ability to suspend our preoccupation with ourselves to enter into the experience of the other, to make ourselves vulnerable to the other, is the essence of good listening.¹ Jesus knew it too, and also knew that empathic listening has the power to transform relationships.

Some hearts are like rocky soil, which roots cannot penetrate. Such a person hears the gospel, makes a quick commitment to it, but has no staying power. They think perhaps that faith should guarantee them a good, secure, and successful life. When it doesn't, (and it won't), they fall away. The impediment is the hardness underneath that limits the depth of one's commitments; it's a shallow heart. The gospel demands our all. Anything less, and we will wither when the going gets tough, or when faith itself becomes demanding.

Still other hearts are filled with thorns. The depth of soil in the heart is all right, but the heart's loyalties are divided. The cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word like weeds, and it yields little. "You cannot serve God and mammon," said Jesus. We need to be faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. False gods, finite cares, and undo anxiety will choke out the harvest of God's word.

Finally though, some hearts are like good soil. They are not impenetrable, nor shallow, nor divided, but fertile and yielding. They see in Jesus Christ, not only the fulfillment of their dreams, but the son of God. They are not faultless, but they are sincere. And though they still do not fully understand all that Jesus says, they trust him. They return to the Bible again and again, turning the ground of Jesus' words over and over. They may not have the answers, but Jesus has captured their attention. They look to him, and above all, they listen to him. They listen, straining to hear and understand the gospel, because they know, that Jesus has the words of abundant life and is in himself the Word of eternal life. And the yield from their faith, is miraculous, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.

It's a mistake for the faithful to apply these criteria to others, that is, to use this parable to judge the hearts of those around us. Judgement is not Jesus' purpose. Rather, it's an invitation to each of us, personally, to prepare our hearts to grow in faith. So yes, the purpose of Jesus' parables, especially of the parable of the Sower, is not to confuse us. It's to summon us to self-examination, and to an attitude of empathy. Listening to it, we consider the impediments in our own lives to hearing and responding to the gospel. Do I misunderstand Jesus because my heart is impenetrable, hardened like a beaten path by self-interest or armored because of too much sorrow and pain? Perhaps I'm confused because my commitments are too shallow. Am I a person without deep roots in anything, who withers when the going gets tough? Or maybe my heart is divided and my growth in faith is being choked by the weeds of worldly concerns and worldly pleasures. The problem, I know, is in me not in Jesus. He has the words of life. He is the word of life. So I will keep following him, I will keep paying attention to him. I will keep listening, to him who is the Christ. "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Rev. Dr. Mark P. Thomas
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
St. Louis, Missouri
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Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

¹ Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*, (New York, Guilford Press, 1995) p.10.