

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 12, 2020

Introduction

I have just finalized my homily for the upcoming Sunday. We continue reading from Matthew's Gospel. With the beginning of the thirteenth chapter, the evangelist shifts the focus from the person of Jesus to the nature of the Kingdom of God and its intersection with the world in which we live. Our Gospel is the **Parable of the Sower** and Jesus' interpretation of the parable for his disciples. The Scripture Lesson suggested by the revised common lectionary to support the Gospel comes from the Isaiah school of prophets. The prophet reminds the people of Israel that God's Word always accomplishes what God intends for it to accomplish [vv.10-11].

So what is God's Word for today? How do we receive it? Why do some hear and understand while others hear and do not? These are good questions for us to consider when so many claim to speak for God. Discerning God's intention is not an easy task for us. Our difficulty is that there are so many distractions. My sermon is an attempt to explore the difference between **listening** and **hearing**.

We live in an environment surrounded by a cacophony of sound that is both distracting and misleading. Our political dialog has moved from disagreement over principles to rancorous *ad hominin* attacks on those who disagree with us. When we factor in the racial tensions of the last several months as Americans finally begin to honestly consider the darkness of our history **and** our weariness of the 'coronavirus lockdown' [and the surging infection rate], it is hard to focus on what God might be saying to us during this difficult time.

Our comfort is that God's Word will not be denied. They will accomplish the good that God intends even if we have difficulty hearing them. But even more comforting is that fact that God [as the Sower] is indiscriminate when it comes to sowing the Word in the world. Even the rocky and the weed infested margins of the field receive God's special attention as the seed [Word] is sown there. Thanks be to God!

Pastoral Note

As Covid-19 infection rates continue to rise across the nation, this continues to be a time for patience. Minnesota has been fortunate to date because our infection rate has remained constant. I believe that this has happened because many of us are wearing masks and continue to practice social distancing as we go about our lives. Right now this is the way we manifest our sense of Christian community by putting

the well being of others ahead of our discomfort because we must wear masks and stay at home.

Please note that we will again be scheduling brief ‘*parking lot communion services*’ as the leadership of our two congregations talk together. You will be informed when these dates are set. In the meantime, be strong and trust God.

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Scripture Lesson – Isaiah 55:10–13

The prophet speaks for God:

¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

¹²For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

¹³Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Gospel – Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.

⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!”

Then Jesus explains the parable to his disciples, ¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

“THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LISTENING AND HEARING”

Let us pray. Creator God, you work unceasingly in the field of humanity sowing the good seed and awaiting its yield. It is our prayer that the power of your Holy Spirit transform our hearts into the good soil you seek. Let your Word bear fruit 100-fold in deeds of compassion as you bring forth the new Kingdom among us. We ask this through our Lord Jesus, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here are some random pieces of information from December 6th and 7th, 1941:

- **2:30 am / December 6th / Hawaii / Army Headquarters at Fort Shafter, Oahu:** Reliable intelligence was received from Washington D.C. that the Japanese embassy burned its code book and ciphers. [The information was considered top secret by the Army and not distributed to the Navy or Air Force.]
- **3:00 pm / December 6th / Washington D.C. / Department of Defense Cryptographic Section:** Civilian translator Dorothy Edger reported intercepting extremely heavy Japanese radio traffic concerning Pearl Harbor naval base.

[When she reported this information to the officer in charge and requested immediate distribution, he replied, 'Why don't you run along . . . ? We'll get back to this piece on Monday.']

- **6:30 am / December 7th / Pearl Harbor / Mobile Radar Unit at Opana, Oahu:** Radar operators, Pvts. Elliot and Lockard, reported 'something completely out of the ordinary' to their watch officer, Lt. Kermit Tyler. In their words, they saw 'an unusually large flight' of aircraft on their screen at a range of 130 miles. [Lt. Tyler was relieved. The B-17's from California were due in shortly. He told the crew, 'Don't worry about it.' At 7:30 am the blips were 45 miles away from Oahu.]
- **7:30 am / December 7th / Pearl Harbor / Fort Shafter - office of General Walter Short, US Army Commander in Hawaii:** When the general saw puffs of smoke in the sky, he asked his aide, Col. Bicknell, 'What's going on out there?' Col. Bicknell replied, 'I'm not sure, but I just saw two battleships sunk.' [General Short looked surprised . . . then he snapped, 'That's ridiculous,' and turned his back.]

When the sun finally set on December 7th, 1941, 300 aircraft were destroyed, 8 battle-ships and 10 support ships were sunk or severely damaged, 2,403 service personnel were killed and 1,178 were wounded. Listening and hearing . . . There is a difference. Sometimes we listen, but oftentimes we do not hear. And rarely has not hearing had such tragic consequences.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A FARMER WENT OUT TO SOW HIS SEED. AS HE WAS SCATTERING THE SEED, SOME FELL ALONG THE PATH, AND THE BIRDS CAME AND ATE IT UP. SOME FELL ON ROCKY PLACES, WHERE IT DID NOT HAVE MUCH SOIL. IT SPRANG UP QUICKLY, BECAUSE THE SOIL WAS SHALLOW. BUT WHEN THE SUN CAME UP, THE PLANTS WERE SCORCHED, AND THEY WITHERED BECAUSE THEY HAD NO ROOT. OTHER SEED FELL AMONG THORNS, WHICH GREW UP AND CHOKED THE PLANTS. STILL OTHER SEED FELL ON GOOD SOIL, WHERE IT PRODUCED A CROP--A HUNDRED, SIXTY, OR THIRTY TIMES WHAT WAS SOWN. THOSE WHO HAVE EARS, LET THEM HEAR."

I think that Jesus' admonition about hearing is the key to unlocking the meaning of this parable. Not just listening the way we listen to music and idle conversation in the coffee shop . . . but hearing . . . Truly hearing what is being said. The problem is that we are a hasty folk who speed-read the imagery, and jump quickly to conclusions. But this is not the way Jesus intended parables to be heard. Parables are not snippets of doctrine about the Kingdom. Instead, one might say that parables actually bring the Kingdom into being for the hearer. In the hands of Jesus, the process is unique. He begins with a simple story from everyday life that suddenly turns upon the hearers, and challenges them with an eternal truth . . . an eternal truth that forces one to make a decision about the Kingdom.

But to hear the parable means that one must listen; something that is so very difficult today. It almost seems as if we don't have time to listen to each other anymore. Often, we just 'talk at each other,' intent only upon getting our point across. Teenagers say that parents do not listen to them, and parents say the same about teenagers. Marital discord often begins when one spouse will not listen to the other. Pro-life and pro-choice people scream at each other, but do not listen to what the other is saying. Since 2016, political discussions, even in families, has often become impossible. In short, disagreements capable of tearing apart families, friendships, and communities occur because we do not listen to each other. We talk to each other, but we do not hear what we are saying. But nonetheless, Jesus says, ***'THOSE WHO HAVE EARS, LET THEM HEAR.'*** In this parable, the key idea is hearing the Word of God. Using Jesus' imagery, our ears are the soil of our lives. Ears listening to the Word are good soil; ears distracted, indifferent, or disinterested are the unfruitful soils of the parable. One must listen to live. ***'THOSE WHO HAVE EARS, LET THEM HEAR.'***

Remembering that the interpretive key to this parable is 'hearing' we look first at the Sower. The Sower is indiscriminate when it comes to throwing seed. Some seed falls on the path and are consumed by the birds; other seed falls among the rocks and dies for lack of soil; and still other seed falls among thorns and is choked. But amazingly, some seed also falls upon good soil and yields a great harvest; even a hundred-fold.

Like the Sower, God is indiscriminate, even careless, with the Word. Certainly, paths and rocks and thistles do not bear much promise, yet God continues to scatter seed

over them. *Who, but God, knows where the good soil is?* It is God's will that all human beings be confronted by the promise of the Gospel. Because God is the sower, there will certainly be a great harvest. Every human being will have the opportunity to hear the life-giving Word.

However, Jesus does not stop after making this point. Had he done so, we could have congratulated ourselves at learning something about the nature of God and let it go at that. But Jesus makes it specific. The seed is the '*Gospel of the Kingdom,*' and when it is sown in people's lives, *something happens.* There is no neutral ground. Positive or negative, good or bad, something always happens. A person is never left the same. They are either hear it or they do not. Whatever the case, they are changed by the Word.

Where does the seed fall? It falls on a variety of soils; each representative of how we listen to the Word.

Some seed falls on the path. This soil is hard and packed down by years of human traffic. The seed that falls on this ground never gets started because the soil is just too hard for the young plant's root. This soil is unsuitable because its orientation is wrong. People are more important to the footpath than are seeds. Similarly, many who hear the Word are more oriented to the world in which they live than they are to the Word of God. The Bible stories heard from youth grow dull and irrelevant when compared to the newspapers of today. Prayer seems to be but an idle waste of time when so much must be done. And even the Church that once seemed so important, is written off as an expensive luxury when it comes to spending incomes in a tight economy. The people of the footpath are so busy with the family, work, and recreation, the so-called '*important things of life,*' that the Word of God cannot be heard.

Other seed falls on rocky soil. This is the soil in which everything grows, but nothing lasts. The Word is heard and embraced, but grows no roots in a person's life. Perhaps people of the rocky soil look for guarantees where there are none; such things as protection from pain and suffering, spiritual highs, and easy discipleship. They are so focused on themselves that they do not hear Jesus say, '**TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME.**' The seed never had a chance.

Other seed falls among the thorns. One might call this '*choked listening.*' The Word is heard, but is slowly drowned out by the many other sounds of life . . . Sounds, I

might add, that are quite important. But one cannot listen equally to all sounds. There must be one to dominate; one to set the theme for living. People of the thorns have no center in their lives; nothing of eternal meaning. Soon, the Word of God is choked out and dies.

And finally, still other seed falls upon good soil. There is nothing complicated about this soil. The parable does not mention fertilizer, weeding, or even no-till farming; but nonetheless, it still grows. The seed enters the soil, grows, and bears fruit. Such people hear the Word of God for what it is ***and nothing else matters.*** Here the seed grows and multiplies; yielding a crop beyond all expectations; even a hundred fold.

In summary then, the Word does not automatically guarantee our salvation. As in the parable of the Sower, God's Word falls upon many different soils. Sometimes it grows, and other times it does not. Salvation comes only when the Word is heard. That is why we come to church: *to hear the Word.* Such hearing begins with ourselves. ***Truly hearing the good news*** that there is a God who loves us more than life itself can only change us . . . ***Truly hearing the good news*** that there is a God who forgives the blackness of my sin can only free me from my brokenness . . . ***And truly hearing the good news*** that God has conquered death, for me and all who believe in Jesus, can only make me God's child forever. Therefore, in the promise of our Baptisms, we can live as people who know that the seed of grace will yield a great harvest.

Moreover, we can also pray that seed might find fertile ground in our hearts. And, if that happens, *who knows* what the harvest will be? . . . 30, 60, or even a 100-fold? *Who knows* what this might mean for Bethel and Immanuel Lutheran Churches? *Who knows* what can happen when the seed takes root in our lives? *Who knows?* All we know is that the harvest is certain; for such is the power of God's Word. ***'THOSE WHO HAVE EARS, LET THEM HEAR!'*** Amen.