

Shakespeare's line in Julius Caesar - "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears," is like the opening to today's lesson. Our parable begins and ends with the admonition to listen. "Listen!" Jesus begins and concludes, "Let anyone with ears listen!" It is an interesting way to begin and end a sermon probably indicating Jesus' concerns about the failure for this to happen. Somehow Jesus knows the listening is going to be a struggle. Maybe that is because Jesus can perceive his audience is tired like a preacher stepping into the pulpit watching the congregation yawn before the sermon has even begun. Or maybe it is because Jesus is going to speak in parables and he knows the level of attention required for true understanding. Or maybe Jesus says 'lend me your ears' to indicate he is going to say something so important they could easily miss the meaning behind his words without listening ears, open minds, and ready hearts.

Today's parable is an important one, in an important sequence of other parables. This falls in the category of undisputed parables, it is a parable about the kingdom of God, and it is one of only six parables that we find it in all of the synoptic gospels (Mark 4:3-9, and Luke 8:5-8). We know that parables were Jesus' preferred teaching method particularly when it came to teaching about matters of complexity. Parables are a powerful vehicle as they create memorable images. On the surface parables are simple stories about everyday things that anyone can understand, but they also have the power to communicate profound meanings. Biblical scholar C.H. Dodd suggests that a parable has the power of "arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." Parables are sometimes enigmatic, concealing even as they reveal and so active listening is required.

There is a Harley Davidson expression, "If I had to explain it, you wouldn't understand." John Baroni, the manager of a Harley Davidson dealership talks about that expression and says, "I don't sell motorcycles; I sell lifestyles." On the surface there is a bike – but with the bike what comes is access to clubs, and a new language, and friendships, and experiences, and a whole new side of life. But to one without a bike it is hard to explain it.

Such is the struggle of the parable – "If I had to explain it, you wouldn't understand." Only in holding the parable yourself, listening, truly listening to it, will you be able to experience it. Jesus does not want to hand us faith on a platter with simple answers but wants to "tease the mind into active thought." The parables are a channel by which we might be led towards faith that is our own, faith that is internally digested, faith that is lasting.

Kenda Dean, one of GPC's recent distinguished guest preachers, talked to us about the need for the faith of teenagers to become 'sticky faith'. She told us the

things the church and parents can do to help transfer faith to this younger generation in ways that would stick with them long after their parents stop driving them to church. As Jesus sits with both the crowds and his gathered disciples, he is also embarking on a mission to create 'sticky faith'. Faith that will last when he is no longer there to instruct. Faith that will inform when life overwhelms with trials. Faith that will infiltrate the hearts and minds and souls of the people. And what Jesus knows is that you probably cannot do that just with simple story telling and warm hugs.

Today's parable is a wonderful example of the work the hearer is called to do when approaching the text. It is the parable of the sower throwing seeds on different types of ground. Birds ate some of the seeds. The sun scorched some of the other seeds. Other seeds were choked by thorns. Lastly the seeds fell on good soil and produced grain. What did you hear in this parable? On layer one there is a message about farming, I suppose but even those not listening closely probably would have perceived that Jesus was not actually trying to provide a master class in how to get the best yield from your crops.

If you listen a bit closer your mind might wander into thinking about the various terrains as different kinds of people, the seed being the Word of God, and the response to God being the harvest. Which groups of people would fit into bird, sun, thorns, or good soil categories? On this level of the parable it is about other people.

Listen a bit closer and you might stop thinking about other people and start thinking about yourself and your own receptivity to God. Where are parts of your life where birds are snatching what is good from in front of you? Or where does the heat and pressure of your life is scorching the joy and the faith? Or where are there thorns that are holding you back trapped in doubt and anger and regret? And lastly where are you actually yielding harvest for God, doing good works, and leading a fruitful life? On this level of the parable it is about you.

Listen a bit closer and you might stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about God. Why did the sower waste seeds on rocky ground? What made the sower plant seeds even in the full sun? How did the sower feel when growth on the good soil came at last? Why did the sower even care about the harvest in the first place? On this level the parable is not about others, it is not about self, it is about God. None of these interpretations might be wrong but maybe some interpretations are more fulsome.

Ultimately, the parable and the lesson is probably less about the soil and more about the sower. The parables are often more lessons about God than we first perceive. There are four concentric circles – on the outer layer it is about farming, at the next layer it is about others, further in still it is about self, and lastly and most centrally it is about God. Specifically in this case, for me what stands out is the extravagant and abundant love of God that does not count the cost of cultivating our hearts and minds and souls. The sower will risk, the sower

will persevere, the sower will wait patiently – all so that we might at last hear, and finally understand, and then respond to that gift of grace. In truly hearing, we can come to believe – believe in God’s remarkable gifts of love and grace for us and for others – and when we believe these things then the faith is transferred to us and begins to stick.

This simple farming illustration does its job as it stirs us to curiosity – providing no easy answers but rather opportunities for deep and meaningful musings of the soul, such is the power of the parable, such is the power of God’s Word. Let anyone with ears listen. Jesus is suggesting that all have the capacity to hear but maybe that only some have the powers to perceive the depth of meaning – like the sensitive ears of a musician catching the undertones and overtones of the meanings held within. We all have ears to hear but are we listening?

George Herbert’s poem *The Elixir* has a stanza that says:

*A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heav'n espy.*

There is a call here to look and listen for God with renewed vigor, for the secrets of the kingdom are not taught but revealed. There are times I’d prefer the path of least resistance, Jesus explaining the truths to me with clarity of conviction and explicit details for how I can best implement the teachings in my life. Come on Jesus, A, B, or C, give me the answer!

My friend Matt Gaventa told me the story he told his congregation on the first Sunday in his new church as their head pastor. He wanted to tell a story that would be biographical and provide a metaphor for revealing a larger truth about faith. The metaphor he used was about the heirloom cast iron pans in his kitchen. He talked about where some of them came from and about learning to care for them and cook with them.

There was a point about not washing the cast iron because the richness of the flavor and texture came from all that had come before, and the legacy and the memories held in each pan as it nourished generation after generation with cornbread – or faith depending on how you are hearing his story. Matt says that after three years at his new church people still talk about that cast iron sermon, they send him recipes for how to cook new things in cast iron, they give him cast iron Christmas presents – the image lives in the corridors of the church. He said, “For better or worse, my preaching life has been permanently associated with a piece of kitchen cookware. And while I am flattered that anything I have said has had any sort of traction, I also suspect – nay, I am beyond certain – that few if any of the hearers that day have any recollections of what theological point the sermon was trying to make. There was one, somewhere, buried underneath all

the kitchen talk. There was a point about Jesus being the living water. I suspect I am the only one who remembers it.”

We cannot totally blame Matt’s church for this as they were listening to that first sermon to try and hear their preacher and get to know him. But he wanted them to hear God and get to know Jesus. “Listen!” he starts and ends his sermon. But sometimes the Word falls to the weeds or the rocks or the birds or the sun but other times, for whatever reason, our ears are open, and our hearts are ready, and our souls are receptive and then we hear God and we get to know Jesus. And that is the goal – it is the goal of the preacher, it is the goal of the parable, it is the goal of the kingdom. To tease your mind into active thought of God and to create within you a faith, which will stick to your flesh and your bones.

So the question becomes what kind of listening are we ready to do in this season of our lives? ‘Let anyone with ears listen!’

Amen.