

10/9/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS

Good morning! Welcome to this place – this respite from busy, anxious, distracted lives. Welcome to this time of prayer, of singing our praises, of hearing God's word of challenge and encouragement. Welcome to this space of worshiping God together, gathered as God's people. This morning we'll begin a series on the Parables of Jesus and for those of you who are in the process of sowing seeds, this morning's parable might take on new and special meanings.

What announcements do you have to share with one another this morning?

We hope you can take time to read the announcements and activities that are shared in the weekly bulletin AND in the mailchimp, announcements pages that come to you each week.

I'm sorry to let you know that as of last evening Jared and Laura had sick kiddos so we'll postpone baby Cody's rosebud blessing.

[CALL TO WORSHIP PRINTED IN THE BULLETIN]

INVOCATION

Creator God, you have made all things and then breathed life into your creation. We honor and praise you. We acknowledge your Holy Spirit presence here, with us as we worship. Open our ears to hear your wisdom. Open our eyes to see your good news. Open our hearts to love as you love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Generous God, in the life of Jesus we can see your extravagant love. We can see the ways that you invite us to live beyond our fears, to reach beyond our cultural boundaries, to love BIG – past the institutional divides. In the life of Jesus we can see the ways you meant for us to live, surprising people with joy and generosity, taking people off-guard with unexpected responses of nonviolence, really engaged, careful listening. In the life of Jesus we can see the significance of taking time for relationships – with one another and with the earth. Thank you, God, for sending Jesus into this world, that in living by his example we can also bring your hope and love. And although we know we can never do it perfectly, we thank you also for your extravagant grace and mercy that allows us to keep trying – the gift in each new day.

O God we thank you for the beauty of your earth, for the changing seasons and the ways they show us your creativity and love. Be with those who are sowing seeds and working the soil. Grant them a measure of your love for the earth that they till. Be with those who work with people, sowing seeds of education and learning in our schools, seeds of compassion and care in nursing homes, seeds of service and helping in our communities. O God, be with those who are in positions of leadership. Grant them the will to seek the well-being of those they serve.

Loving God, we pray for those we know and love who need healing. We pray for Ellie and Logan that they would return to their spunky, energetic selves soon. We pray for Jared and Laura and baby Cody that they would stay healthy. We pray for Braxton as he returns to Boston next

week for on-going treatment and procedures. Grant safe travels and attentive medical care. We pray for loved ones and friends who are struggling with health issues that have yet to be clearly identified and treated. May the doctors and care-takers have perseverance and wisdom to know how to give relief and bring healing. We pray, God, for those whose need for healing is from grief, loneliness, depression or anxiety – dis-ease that can't easily be seen but is ever present and painful. Lord, send your Spirit of comfort, of relief and release.

We are grateful, God, for the gift of new life. Thank you for the safe passage of Aubryn to Kendra and Kevin. Thank you for the love that she will know from big brother Levi and grandparents, Dwight and Tammy.

And thank you God, for the hope that is inspired from the birth of the tiniest child all the way to the most grand and world-renowned peace prizes that were given recently. We can take great hope in the acknowledgment of the work of those who are in the struggle for peace in these most difficult situations.

Be with us now God, as we continue to worship, to learn, to be challenged and encouraged in our discipleship journey. Send your Spirit to lead us, to give us wisdom, to nudge and mold us as we try to follow Jesus faithfully. Amen.

LISTEN! – PASTOR CALEB

Mark 4:1-20, 33-34

Have you ever wondered why Jesus taught in parables? Especially if many people would not understand them? Why wouldn't Jesus want to have a more direct communication style? Why would he want to confuse people?

What does it mean anyway to have eyes to see and ears to hear? We will ponder some of these questions today.

Recently we got a hearing test for our three-year-old Josiah. His preschool teacher commented that they have to repeat a lot to him. "Is there any chance he has hearing loss?" she asked.

We thought it is probably just Josiah being three, but to know for sure, we had his hearing checked. His hearing is just fine. Beth just has to deal with living with three males who have selective hearing.

Jesus' parable hinges on the fact that we can hear but not "get it."

The core of Jesus' message and teaching came in the form of parables. So we will spend some time this fall unpacking some of the parables, hoping to understand the reign of God Jesus proclaimed.

But before we go further, I want to address *what is a parable?* Because of the most well-known parables like the parable of the prodigal son or the parable of the good Samaritan, we often think of a parable as a story that Jesus told to communicate some heavenly truth.

[SLIDE: WHAT IS A PARABLE]

In fact, the term “parable” is much broader than that. A parable is basically a comparison. Two things set beside each other. A parable communicates a deeper truth with a comparison or illustration from every day life.

A parable can be very short: for example, Jesus refers to the “lesson” of the fig tree, but the Greek text actually has the word “parable.” Many of you are familiar with the biblical book of Proverbs. “Parable” is how the concept of the Hebrew proverb is translated into Greek.

So the Bible doesn’t contain just a few memorable stories called “parables.” It has hundreds of little parables. Parables are illustrations, they can be symbolic, they can function like riddles. Knowing this may help us understand that a parable is not just there to be a nice story. Jesus was a master communicator. What’s he really trying to teach?

The parable of the sower is the first of the major parables in Mark’s Gospel, so I thought it’s a good place to start. Some of you were part of a Bible study on this parable, and your insights have helped me write this message.

Jesus was teaching the crowds by the sea. There are so many people, that Jesus gets in a boat to not be overrun by people, much as a rock star is separated from fans by being on the stage.

“Listen!” Jesus says.

You’ve probably heard it before. A farmer gets out his 24-row seed drill... Except this is the first century: A sower goes out to broadcast seed. Some seed falls on the beaten path that is too compacted, and just gets eaten by birds.

Other seed falls on rocky patches and can’t send deep enough roots to survive the scorching heat. Other seed falls among thorns and it choked before it can develop into a mature plant. Finally, some seed chances to fall on good soil and produces good yield.

So far, we have something pretty realistic for Jesus’ day. The Palestinian soil was rocky and difficult. It’s not clear if the farmer intends to till the soil with the broadcast seed so that the seed is buried. This is either a very lazy and neglectful sower, or it’s about the best you can do in the harsh soil conditions.

One detail stands out as particularly unrealistic. It’s where the realism ends that we have to particularly pay attention. The yield is outrageous. For every one bag sown, the farmer has 30, 60, or even 100 bags of grain.

I tried to figure out what the seed ratio would be around here for wheat with the help of Matt Voth. If you plant about 100 pounds of wheat seed per acre and you harvest about 50 bushel/acre, that comes to a 30:1 ratio. OK, so that’s the low end of the harvest in Jesus’ parable, which also had a lot of seed wasted on bad soil.

2000 years ago, a peasant might have expected a 5:1 ratio – five bags harvested for every bag sown. So, imagine going from five to thirty, sixty, or a hundred. That makes the harvest of the parable particularly unrealistic and astounding.

“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear,” Jesus says. What does Jesus mean? He leaves people hanging.

Later, Jesus is with just the 12 disciples and others “around him.” Mark leaves to our imagination who they are. Maybe folks that are traveling around with Jesus, or a few people in the crowd that are interested enough, they stuck around when everyone else left.

They ask him about the parables. Jesus tells them that he will only speak to the mass of people in parables – in riddled sayings. The inner group is privy to the “mystery” or “secret” of the kingdom of God.

The word is literally “mystery” though “mystery” had more of the sense of something hidden that is now finally being disclosed. Whatever it is, it isn’t obvious. It’s not like the public would see something and say, “oh, it’s the kingdom of God.”

Jesus says something very puzzling. The reason he speaks in parables is so that people will see but *not* perceive. They will hear but *not* understand. They will hear Jesus speak, but not “get it.”

What’s hard about this saying is that on the surface, it sounds like he *doesn’t* want people to understand. He wants to prevent people from understanding the message and being forgiven.

How does that square with the Jesus we see elsewhere teaching about the shepherd who goes out to look for one lost sheep, or the Jesus who was willing to eat with prostitutes, tax collectors, and “sinners”?

Why would Jesus want people to *not* understand? These hard to understand words actually come from Isaiah.

[SLIDE: ISAIAH 6]

Toward the beginning of the book of Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of being taken up to God’s throne. While there, the voice of God asks, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah the prophet volunteers. “Here I am. Send me!”

And then God gives similar words that Jesus alludes to. On the surface, it’s saying: *you’ll give a message that will make people even more stubborn and unwilling to listen. People will hear something, but it will just make them even more hardhearted.*

It’s not very optimistic. In fact, Isaiah anticipates assured disaster with only “holy seed” left in the stumps left from the trees cut down in the land. (Maybe that’s as much as we can hope for with the many crises of our day.)

Imagine going to school to be a teacher, and in your education classes you were taught that your job is to make students hate school and lose the joy of learning. That’s like the opposite of what you’re going for.

Like so many things related to the Bible, there are different opinions about what to do with these verses. It seems to me they are sarcastic. Both Isaiah and Jesus faithfully gave a message without holding back. But they had no illusions of persuading everybody. They knew they’d have resistance.

In fact, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has already faced criticism and accusation in chapter 3. Jesus' ministry of reaching out to the excluded put him in a collision path with religious leaders. They are already plotting to kill him.

There're a few possibilities for understanding why Jesus taught in parables. One possibility is that it was strategic, maybe even a matter of survival for Jesus' movement.

Parables may even reach some who wouldn't receive a direct message. A biblical example is the parable that the prophet Nathan used to confront King David when he had an affair and murdered the woman's husband. If Nathan hadn't started with a parable, he might not have lasted much longer.

Not everyone will respond favorably. Not everyone will "get it." By teaching in parables, Jesus can get the message out in a way that will confound those who would reject the message even if Jesus said it very plainly and directly.

For others, a parable is an invitation. It is accessible to those who have "ears to hear" regardless of your education level. Parables communicate what learned people don't get. Many of us are astounded by the unexpected insight of a child. Formal education is very valuable, but no guarantee of the understanding that Jesus was after.

My dad's uncle Roy had an 8th grade education, but a brilliant mind. He invented big ice cutter with a circular blade powered by a motorcycle. This was in the days when they'd use blocks of ice taken from frozen ponds and lakes for refrigeration. Roy also invented a baler that was fixed to the chassis of a truck for the purpose of custom baling. He had to re-gear the transmission to allow the truck to creep very slowly in the field.

Similarly, to have "ears to hear" Jesus' message isn't about having a degree or certain accomplishments. As soon as we are driven by ego, we aren't grasping the message. We fall in the trap of either thinking we are better, we are accomplished, we are more righteous. Or we unnecessarily disqualify ourselves. *I'm not worthy. I don't get it. I haven't studied enough. I'm not good enough.*

I imagine parables created a kind of porous or fuzzy line between those who were clearly with Jesus and those who weren't. Those who were "around Jesus" were beginning to form a counter-community with an alternative practice to the dominant society.

The parables gave people an opportunity to chew on something. Sometimes that's just what we need. We need to think and reflect. We need everyday comparison that sticks with us, that has deeper meaning we will only begin to grasp with time.

Perhaps parables communicate truths that elude human language. If you try to say it directly you will always end up obscuring or confusing the truth.

Jesus did not give out short tweets that created media sensation and outrage. Jesus gave profound teaching that asks for time, reflection, and investment from people in order to receive the seeds of truth.

If you have ears to hear, you will be willing to invest. In fact, the close circle of followers was willing to leave behind possessions and family in order to follow Jesus. Their discipleship allowed them to receive more explanation from Jesus.

There are heroic examples of Christians who “got it.” We can easily celebrate the examples of people like Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Francis of Assisi, or the early Anabaptists. Yet very often the majority of Christians in history have turned a blind eye or have even been complicit in Apartheid, the holocaust, racial segregation and the slave trade, exploitative colonization, and warfare.

Carrying the name “Christian” isn’t a guarantee that you bear fruit, that you both hear and understand. If that’s been true in the past, it is true in the present. How do we know that we are those who hear and also understand?

[SLIDE: OUTLINE]

What might get in the way for us? As Jesus explained the parables to the disciples, he mentioned several things that prevent the good news from bearing fruit in our lives as we hear it.

Like the seed falling on the beaten path, we can be too stubborn, and have too much pride to let the word penetrate into our hearts. That would require admitting we aren’t perfect, we don’t have it all together, we are broken. Exactly the opposite of the image we try to project of ourselves in public.

We all can also relate to the metaphors of rocky soil and thorns. We know how difficult it is to stick to your principles when you feel pressured and stressed.

The thorns particularly symbolize the predicament of the American church. Our wealth and our geographical and social segregation from both the developing world as well as from poor or racially diverse communities leaves us preoccupied with middle-class concerns that aren’t the stuff of the kingdom of God. *“The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things”* – we can all make some good guesses about what those things are in our lives.

While there are clearly things that get in the way of bearing fruit, the parable of Jesus also teaches us to never make assumptions about where you will find good soil and where you won’t. Be careful about drawing the line between those who “get it” and those who don’t. Between who is worth your time and who is not.

All of this is juxtaposed with a sower who sowed without discrimination. A sower who was either lazy or extravagant, depending on how you look at it. What if the point of the parable is not so much about us or our anxiety of whether we are in the thorns or on rocky soil?

What if it is first of all about God? First of all, about the extravagant grace of God that has the power to create an incredible and outstanding harvest while sowing indiscriminately.

Barbara Brown Taylor put it like this: *“What if it is not about us at all but about the sower? What if it is not about our own successes and failures... but about the extravagance of a sower who*

*does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon...*¹

Amid our human brokenness, God is able to bring in an abundant harvest. To begin to see this is to begin to perceive the kingdom of God.

Jesus spoke in parables so that those who truly want to understand with a genuine heart will understand at least enough to make the next step. Our desire to understand must not come from a desire to be better than someone else, nor even to be worthy or good enough, because the gospel teaches that you are already loved before you've done anything to prove yourself.

Our desire to understand certainly has little to do with our outward level of "success" in the world. A genuine desire to understand simply comes out of a genuine desire to live a life of love.

The God revealed in Jesus is not being difficult or shutting us out. When we desire to understand and are willing to give of ourselves, then the understanding we need won't be far, no matter who you are.

Let the one with ears to hear hear.

Listen!

BENEDICTION

May you be hearing and also understanding,

Seeing and also perceiving,

May God open your eyes and enable you to understand with your ears that you might be healed and be healing for others.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 25–26.