

## “Dig In”

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - July 12, 2020  
Psalm 119:105-112 ~ Romans 8:1-11 ~ Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

As a preacher, I understand how hard it is to get an idea out of my head, into sensible words, and across the open air into the heads of a diverse crowd. I mean, you are good listeners and way above the average intelligence of any other congregation, but occasionally it seems like I’m not getting through. Some weeks preaching feels like the old game of “telephone” we played as kids, you know, where you take a common phrase like “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and whisper it to the next person, who whispers it to the next, who whispers it to the next, and so on until the last person announces it out loud as “Shoot your mothers for what they did to you.” Because sometimes I can tell I’m missing the mark ... and the look on your faces seem to say, “What is your point, pastor? What are you trying to say?”

Well, I’m glad to know that Jesus got that reaction sometimes, too. Matthew says that day the crowd was so large that Jesus had to get in a boat where he could push off a bit so everybody sitting on the shore could hear him. “Listen!” he said. Well, that’s what they were there to do. But he still said it. “Listen!” Because you and I both know, people don’t listen. They drop in and out of the conversation like so many dolphins diving down through the waters of consciousness ... and leaping up occasionally to get a breath of air or a piece of fish. As a rule, we don’t listen, which is why God had to send prophet after prophet after prophet ... and finally Jesus ... who still had to begin his remarks by saying, “Listen!”

“Listen!” he says. And then he tells them the parable of “A Sower Went Out to Sow:” and his last words were “*Let anyone with ears listen!*” Then Jesus said, “The Word of God for the people of God,” and the people said, “Huh?” They were like the duck in the AFLAC commercial ... slack-jawed and dumbstruck.

This parable is unusual among Jesus’ many parables of the gospels in two respects. The first is that after Jesus tells this parable to the crowd, the inner circle of his disciples pull him aside to ask him what in the Sam Hill he is trying to say. That part of this passage isn’t included in our lectionary reading today, but here’s a synopsis. “Jesus, what is your point?” they ask him. “And why do you teach so much in parables (which are confusing and hard to understand)?”

Jesus’ response is very interesting here. “He answered, *“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”* Sounds elitist, doesn’t it? Well it’s right there in verse 12 ... you can look it up. Does Jesus mean to suggest that only certain qualified people can understand his teaching, but everybody else won’t get it? Lord knows, there have been people

who believed that way. There was a time when common people weren't even allowed to own Bibles. There are still churches today who say only the apostles and their heirs, only the ordained, only the priests, only the preachers can deliver the Word of God. Some preachers tell us that only *they* have the right to interpret God's true and infallible Word and if we don't agree we ought to be banned from the faith, for God's sake. But the UCC has never bought that mess of pottage. *We* say that "God is still speaking!" But if Jesus *doesn't* mean to say only a certain elite group of leaders can understand and interpret his words for the rest of us, what *does* he mean?

Well, Jesus goes on to say, "*The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive'*" (Matt 13:13-14). That's odd on the face of it. Jesus speaks as if he *intends* that some people not understand what he is saying. Why? Again he quotes Isaiah: "*For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and 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.'*" (Matt 13:15).

Aha! There's the reason we are so hard of hearing. It's not a problem with those three little bones which interpret sound waves from our eardrums to our brains. The problem is deeper. We *choose* not to hear. We don't want to hear what God has to tell us. We don't want to hear the truth about ourselves. We don't want to know that healing is possible because we don't want to do what it takes to be healed. And that's why Jesus teaches in parables, because parables require some intentional listening. Those who wish to hear ... will ... and those who do not wish to hear ... won't. "*But blessed are your eyes,*" Jesus tells the Twelve "*for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it*" (Matt 13:16-17). So, Jesus is *not* saying a certain group of elite interpreters have been selected to be the official authorities on God's word. In fact, Jesus gives his teachings to everybody. We all have the same scripture. His point is that some people understand because they are willing to hear ... not just to listen to the words ... but to chew on them ... to live with them ... to live by them ... to plant their lives in them. They are willing to hear with their heads, but also with their hearts, their hands, and their feet. It is the willingness to let the Word of God read you and tell your story. It is the difference between a superficial approach to scripture as a fixed list of do's and don'ts ... and a deeper way of living out of the text in continual relation to its stories and its Spirit.

So, what *is* the point of this parable “A Sower Went Out to Sow” that Jesus gives the crowd in Matthew 13? *Is it* a self-evident statement that some people are going to respond to God, and some are not? *Is it* an encouragement to be the right kind of soil, to be one of those types who are receptive and responsive, ready to listen, eager to understand, raring to do what God asks you to do? *Is it* educational ... a new system dividing people into types? Is it asking, what kind of soil are you?

Maybe Jesus wants us to reflect on how we have *all four* types of soils within us and pass through different times when we are more responsive than others. That we should tend the garden of our spirituality and dig it deep ... keep it weed-free ... let it flourish. Or maybe the soil is not so much the point as the sowing. Maybe Jesus is saying don't get discouraged if the response is not always what you hoped. Keep sowing the seed of God's word. Spread it everywhere. Read it, learn it, share it, teach it, tell it, live it. The response is not up to you ... just the sowing. God will bring the harvest, and it will be more than you ever imagined. Is that what Jesus is trying to say? There's a lot of extravagance in this story. Is Jesus suggesting we look at all the good seed God sends our way and the amazing harvest we share in this rich, wonderful life? Is that the point of this parable? Or is it all of the above?

What makes the parables ... and many other teachings of Jesus ... so hard to understand is that they defy simple interpretations. They may use simple illustrations from the daily life of the time, but they are far from simple. They are richly layered with meaning. They deconstruct common beliefs about God and expose them as superstitions. They offer several, parallel, even competing possibilities. You think you get it, but you read it again a few months or years later, and suddenly you see all kinds of new possibilities you never saw before. New experiences in life open new possibilities of interpretation. The teachings of Jesus ... of the scripture as a whole ... are inexhaustible. Understanding them takes a lifetime ... even all of history ... spent walking with and listening to the Still Speaking God. Which is also why we need each other ... and to be in dialogue with all of the scholars of the church ... all its saints and servants through all time ... to hear what God is still saying to us.

The second unusual feature of this parable in Matthew is that Jesus gives the twelve an interpretation of what the parable means. He doesn't usually do that. He doesn't chew our food for us, which makes some interpreters wonder if it isn't Matthew's interpretation ... rather than Jesus' interpretation ... we are getting here. As Matthew has it, Jesus elaborates on the different soils as different response to the seed of God's word. Ironically, this elaboration raises as many questions as the original parable. Does this interpretation eliminate other possible interpretations or simply highlight one?

Some people want to reduce the Bible to being a Ouija Board they can use to predict the future, usually to say they are “in” and everybody not like them is “out” and God will destroy all us “outs” and bless all the “ins” forever and ever, amen. In the words of that great song by the Austin Lounge Lizards, they use the Bible to say, “*Jesus Loves Me, but He Can’t Stand You.*” And some people want to reduce the Bible to a law code they can use to control the world and make it feel safe. These people, God help them, reduce the extravagant grace and literary power of the Bible to a list of do’s and don’ts that look pretty much like the social rules of the race and class and clan to which they belong, only with God’s imprint upon it. And some people want to use faith to reduce life to a boring sameness ... suspicious of learning, richness, and depth, and making all people clones of some imagined ideal. I think these people have their math all wrong. God adds, but they subtract. God multiplies, but they divide. God is measured in light years, and they want to use stop watches. I believe God is bigger, richer, more complex and more gracious than we can ever imagine, and that God wants us to be more, not less, deeper and not shallower.

Therefore, I invite you today to open your life to a big, extravagant God who offers you the rich resources of grace for an abundant life. Don’t be satisfied splashing around in the shallow end when God offers you such depths to explore. Open yourself to God’s word. Open yourself to God’s presence in the sacred mystery. Open yourself to the beauty of the earth, nature, art, literature, music, relationship, community, family, church. Dig in ... and let the seeds of God’s grace find good soil in you, and you will be amazed by the harvest God produces. Let anyone with ears, listen!

May we pray?

All embracing God, Fear, and foolishness, even sometimes laziness, cause us to make you smaller and resist the soul-growth you would inspire. Forgive us. We pray the seed of your Word might find good soil in us and take deep root and produce the harvest of extravagant grace and generosity, of rich and fertile creativity, of joyful and healing love which come from you alone through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.