

Isaiah 55:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 12, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

LISTEN FOR THE WORD OF GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Tuesday night I watched again Steven Spielberg's remarkable movie, *Lincoln*. The film is based on Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals*, about President Lincoln and his cabinet. The movie focuses on the fight to pass the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery. Lincoln wants the amendment passed before the end of the Civil War, so the action occurs in the month of January 1865, just a couple of months before his second inauguration.

Daniel Day-Lewis won the Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of our 16th president. In addition to his uncanny physical resemblance to Lincoln, the actor does a masterful job of conveying the President's personality, including his love of telling stories. Lincoln's critics cringed at his homespun stories. In one scene, as the President and his cabinet are monitoring the progress of the Union attack on Fort Fisher and the Port of Wilmington, President Lincoln starts to tell a funny story about Ethan Allen and George Washington. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton throws his hands up in the air and says in exasperation, "He's getting ready to tell another story!" As the Secretary storms out of the room, he shouts, "I cannot bear to listen to another of his stories!"

Abraham Lincoln drew from his humble upbringing and his experiences as a lawyer to tell stories to all kinds of audiences: soldiers in the field; visitors to the White House looking for patronage appointments; Cabinet members debating the fate of the nation. His stories were about familiar and comfortable situations and topics most listeners could relate to. But he didn't tell them just for entertainment's sake. Lincoln told his stories to make his point, by causing his audience to stop and think and question and, perhaps, change their minds and see things in a different light. In the movie, and maybe in real life, Lincoln would say, "That reminds me of a story . . ."

Jesus tells a lot of stories — "parables" — especially in the Gospel of Matthew. We might think a parable is a simple story with a comforting message or a rule for a better life, something like Aesop's Fables. But Jesus told his parables in much the same way and for the same reason Abraham Lincoln told his stories. He used familiar scenes from everyday life to get his listeners to look at their own lives in a different light. So it's not too hard to imagine Jesus talking with his disciples or the Pharisees and Sadducees and saying, "That reminds me of a story . . ."

Which is pretty much how the 13th chapter of Matthew begins, a chapter full of Jesus' parables. Matthew writes, "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in par-

ables, saying: ‘Listen! That reminds me of a story . . .’ (Matthew 13:1-3a, with my addition at the end!)

I want to share Jesus’ story in two parts. And, instead of beginning at the beginning, I want to start at the end, where Jesus says: “Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matthew 13:9) As you listen to Jesus’ story, think about these questions:

- * What did you hear?

- * Where are you in this parable?

- * When and how have you felt all of these responses to God’s Word? Why?¹

Imagine Jesus sitting in a boat off the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the shore full of people who have come to hear him preach. Maybe as Jesus scans the crowd he happens to see, off in the distance, a man carefully walking back and forth on the hillside. So Jesus says, “That reminds me of a story . . .”

Matthew 13:3-8: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

Now I don’t know much of anything about agriculture and gardening. Nancy has the green-thumb in our family and our back yard is beautiful because of that. But this story about a sower going out to sow got me thinking. Is that really the best way to plant seed? Just throw it wherever and see what happens?

Not according to Garden Gate Magazine. In an article called “How to sow seeds outdoors,” Jennifer Howell shares some tips on how best to direct-sow seeds into your garden:

- * Make sure your seedbed has been rained on or watered so the soil is moist and can hydrate the seeds.

- * Make sure you plant when it’s overcast so the sun doesn’t scorch the soil and the seeds.

- * Plant when mild temperatures are forecast and make sure the temperatures don’t vary much in the week after you sow the seeds.

- * As much as possible, make sure you plant when there are no big storms predicted, so the seeds don’t get washed away.

She then gives some pretty thorough instructions about how to prepare the garden bed and plant the seeds.

What a contrast to the sower in the story. He just tossed the seeds out willy-nilly. Some seeds fell on the path. Some fell on rocky ground. Some fell among the thorn-plants. Even though some of those seeds sprouted, none of them survived for long because the birds ate them, the soil was too shallow, the sun was too hot, and the thorns choked them out.

Fortunately, some of the seeds fell on good soil and, lo and behold, the sower reaped a HUGE harvest — thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even a hundredfold! Again, I don’t

know much about agriculture, but I reckon that a hundredfold crop yield would be staggering and enormous, maybe more than enough to make up for the seeds that landed on the path, on the rocky ground, and among the thorn-plants.

So, what did you hear? Where are you in this parable? Do you have enough information yet to understand the parable and decide how it fits your life or, better yet, how it challenges your life?

To be honest, we really don't have enough information, do we? For one thing, the sower seems to be pretty irresponsible. And second, what's with the incredible harvest? Maybe the disciples were in the same boat. Matthew tells us they came and asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Why, indeed, Jesus? Why don't you just tell us straight-out what you're talking about? Ah, but that's the beauty of Jesus' stories. He captures our attention with the familiar scenes and characters, and then includes a plot-twist at the end that causes us to scratch our heads and think deeply about what his story really means for our lives. That's probably why Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears listen!" or, as *The Message* says, "Are you listening to this? Really listening?"

It just so happens that this is one of the few parables that includes an explanation from Jesus:

Matthew 13:18-23: "Hear then the parable of the sower. When 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet 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. As 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. But 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."

It's tempting and dangerous to assume right off the bat that the four soils represent four different groups of people. After all, as you heard Jesus explain his story, did you find yourself thinking, "Oh yeah, my life has been hard packed as that path sometimes. My life can get rocky sometimes. My life is full of cares and concerns sometimes. Thank God, occasionally my life seems to be like the good soil and something grows from time to time"? But it's also dangerous to assign people to the four different types of "soil" because, you know what? We tend to end up putting ourselves in the "good soil" category most of the time. But maybe our soil could be better prepared for the word of the kingdom . . .

That reminds me of a story . . . An old farmer, who looked like he was down on his luck, was standing on his porch when a stranger walked up and asked him for a drink of water. As they stood and looked out at the fields, the stranger asked the farmer, "How's your cotton coming along?"

“Ain’t got any,” said the farmer.

“Did you plant any?”

“Nope,” said the farmer. “Afraid of the boll weevils.”

“Well,” asked the stranger, “how’s your corn?”

The farmer shook his head and said, “Didn’t plant any, afraid there would be no rain.”

The stranger persisted: “Well, how are your potatoes?”

Of course, the farmer said, “Ain’t got any, scared of the potato bugs.”

At this point the stranger was mystified. “Really? What did you plant?”

The farmer said, “Nothing, I just played it safe.”

And the stranger asked, “How safe is it not to have any crops at all?”

How often do we play it safe when it comes to listening for the Word of God? Oh, we might “hear” the familiar words, but we can always “hear” the words without “listening” **for** the Word. We harden our hearts to the message. The cares and concerns of the world crowd out God’s Word in our lives. Our enthusiasm for God’s Word wanes, especially when God’s Word has a plot-twist that challenges our long-held assumptions and our justifications for the ways things are and always have been. We play it safe when it comes to listening for God’s Word because, after all, who wants to deal with the trouble and persecution that can arise on account of the word?

Maybe we’ve been too hard on the sower who went out to sow. What appears to be an irresponsible waste of seed might actually point us to the extravagant grace of God that is scattered and sown anywhere and everywhere his Word is shared. And remember the end of the story! “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.” (Matthew 13:23)

One writer has put it this way: “Understanding is not simply intellectual assent or theoretical knowledge, rather understanding is ‘perceiving clearly’ and ‘comprehending thoroughly’ and being ‘spiritually intelligent.’”² In the same way, another commentator points out that we “need to be warned of the difference between simply ‘hearing’ the word and ‘understanding’ it. The commitment of today’s Christians is threatened less by persecution than by secular scorn (‘You don’t really believe all that stuff, do you?’), but otherwise little has changed. The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches are still able to choke the word. Christians must pray for the gift of understanding, so that what they believe with their minds may be acted out in their daily behavior.”³

I try to publish the scripture lessons for my sermons ahead of time in the newsletter and website so you can read the stories and do some “soil of the heart” preparation before you come to worship and listen for God’s Word. My weekly sermon preparation, your getting ready for worship by reading and listening for God’s Word, and, we hope and pray, the activity of God’s Holy Spirit in all our lives reminds me of what the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

When I introduce the scripture lessons each Sunday, I invite you to “listen for the Word of God.” It’s a way of saying, “Let anyone with ears listen! Are you listening to this? Really listening?”

Let us pray: Loving God, we seek to do your will each and every day. Thank you for your Word of life, which we heard again this morning. May your Word take root in our hearts and bear fruit in our lives as we serve you, O God. Amen.

NOTES

¹Taken from Karoline Lewis, “Birds, Thorns, and Other Surprising Responses to God’s Word,” Sunday, July 6, 2014 at www.workingpreacher.org.

²Jill Duffield, “6th Sunday after Pentecost: God does amazing work through that which we fail to even notice,” Monday, July 6, 2020 at www.pres-outlook.org.

³Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 154.