

July 16, 2023
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Pentecost 7
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“All Ears for God’s Word”

“Let anyone with ears listen!”

Our days at Stony Brook School followed a regular routine of classes, recess, and lunch, a routine that rarely varied from day to day. But one day, we were surprised to learn that we would be given hearing tests in the gymnasium. I can still remember being invited to put on a set of headphones and respond to the various beeps and whistles, pointing to which ear we could hear these sounds. It was a fairly simple test, but an important tool for hearing specialists to identify any hearing loss or deficiencies that had previously gone undetected. For us, it was a nice diversion from our usual routine and an opportunity to marvel at the high-tech equipment that had made its way into our gym.

When all the class had been tested (and to the best of my knowledge no one had been identified with any hearing issues) we were about to go back to our classroom when Mr. Johnson appeared outside of his office. Mr. Johnson was our gym teacher and one of the more cantankerous members of the faculty; he always seemed to be in a bad mood, and no matter what we did he always had a sarcastic remark in response to anything we did in class. True to form, Mr. Johnson surveyed the scene on the other side of the gym and then announced to the whole class “Well, I see that you can all hear; now we have to find out if you know how to listen.”

We could have dismissed this remark as simply another one of Mr. Johnson’s many sarcastic barbs; but his statement stayed with me for a long time. At first, I was confused; are not hearing and listening the same thing? But over time, I discovered that while both are related to the same sense, there is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is the physical ability to receive and recognize sounds, that which was measured in our hearing tests. Listening, while it involves hearing, goes to a deeper level of understanding the meaning of what our ears have received. While everyone who passed the tests in our gymnasium had the ability to hear, we needed to prove whether we knew how to listen, to make sense of the sounds that were coming into our auditory organs.

Learning how to listen is a skill that often needs to be developed if we are to effectively use the sounds that we receive through hearing (lest we fall prey to the

situation described in *The Sound of Silence*: “People talking without speaking, people hearing without listening.”). Hearing without listening means that there is no real communication; people hear words and sentences, but the meaning does not register within the brain. Some people seek to address this problem through “active listening,” which requires a person to listen attentively to a speaker, understand what they are saying, respond and reflect on what’s being said, and retain the information for later; according to one practitioner of this technique, “*active listening is listening on purpose.*”

While the phrase “active listening” has only existed for a short time, this emphasis on listening with the purpose of understanding and empathizing with what is being said is an integral part of Jesus’ teaching in today’s Gospel lesson. The series of eight parables that begin with the parable of the Sower mark a dramatic shift in Jesus’ teaching method in Matthew. This discourse follows the narrative in Matthew 11-12, which highlighted the mounting division between those who follow Jesus and those who do not receive his teaching. Jesus characteristically taught in parables throughout the Gospels, as “*the newness of Jesus’ message called for a new form of communication.*” (M. Eugene Boring). Jesus’ method of communicating in parables was not the typical practice of contemporary rabbis but a “*new and unsettling departure in religious communication.*” Parables were disturbing stories that threatened the hearer’s secure mythological world, “*the world of assumptions by which we habitually live, the unnoticed framework of our thinking within which we interpret other data.*” Parables surreptitiously attack the framework of our thought world; they are “*disruptive vehicles of a new vision of how things are, a vision that challenges our secure world.*”

- “In a set of seven parables, Jesus reveals the character of the reign of God – the ‘reign [or realm] of the heavens,’ in Matthew’s customary phrasing ... Here Jesus invites the disciples to arrive at a deeper understanding not yet attained by the crowds.” – John T. Carroll.

Matthew has located his “parable discourse” amid the conflict section in which Jesus is being rejected by the leaders of Israel, the new community of disciples is being formed, and the inclination of the people hangs in the balance. Since judgment is at the heart of Matthew’s view of the kingdom, “parables of the kingdom” means parables of the coming judgment. “*For Matthew, to know God’s plan for history, culminating in the judgment of the Son of Man, is to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.*” (Boring). The contrasts between good soil and bad soil, wheat and weeds, and good fish and bad fish shed light on the positive and negative responses to Jesus’ ministry.

Matthew introduces this new section of his Gospel by informing his readers that on “*that same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea*” (13:1). Jesus presents these parables on the same day that he has been confronted by the Pharisees (“*But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.’*” – 12:24). The Evangelist reports that “*Jesus went out of the house,*” probably Peter’s house in Capernaum where Jesus took up residence. After he exits the house, Jesus “*sat beside the sea,*” assuming the position of a rabbi about to teach (“*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*” – 5:1). When he sees a large crowd that has gathered to hear his teaching, Jesus “*got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach*” (13:2). Matthew marks the shift in Jesus’ teaching method by announcing that “*he told them many things in parables*” (13:3), which are “*extended metaphors or similes that often extend into short narratives used for teaching*” (John D. Crossan). The Greek word for “parable” (*parabole*) generally means “placing beside”; the word is used in Scripture to denote a variety of literary forms such as sayings, riddles, proverbs, or narratives that illustrate a truth and make comparisons to real life situations. In the Old Testament, such sayings were known as *mashal*, a statement such as a proverb or allegory intended to stimulate thought:

- “I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.” – Psalm 49:4).
- “Your influence spread throughout the earth, and you filled it with proverbs having deep meaning.” – Sirach 47:15.
- “O mortal, propound a riddle, and speak an allegory to the house of Israel” – Ezekiel 17:2.

Jesus’ parables “*veil the deeper mysteries of the kingdom from those who reject his teachings, while giving his disciples, who are open to his message, an opportunity to be instructed in these mysteries.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

Jesus’ first parable is focused on “*a sower [who] went out to sow*” (13:3b). This “Parable of the Sower” draws on images that for ancient Jews would have been familiar not only from the agricultural world in which they lived but also from the Old Testament, where God was depicted as a sower and the seed represented his word that would accomplish his purpose, producing an abundant crop:

- “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes 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.” – Isaiah 55:10-11.

- “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD.” – Jeremiah 31:27-28.

In the parable, the sower is now Jesus, and the seed is his Word – his proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. The different soils represent the different kinds of responses to his ministry. For Matthew, Jesus accompanies the church throughout history, is the one who is present and active in the sowing of the Word, identifies himself with his missionaries, and is active in the life and ministry of his church:

- “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” – 10:40.
- “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” – 18:18-20.
- “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” – 28:20.

While the Parable of the Sower is addressed to the large crowd that has gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the attention turns to Jesus’ disciples, who ask him (in a section that is omitted from today’s Gospel lesson) “*why do you speak to them in parables?*” (13:10). Jesus responds by stating that “*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’*” (13:13). Jesus then quotes the prophet Isaiah, who differentiates between hearing and listening which leads to understanding:

- “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. 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.” – 13:14-15, Isaiah 6:9-10.

Jesus then offers his disciples an interpretation of the parable, something that is rare in the Gospels. He compares the “*seeds that fell on the path, and the birds came*

and ate them up” (13:4) with those who hear the Word without understanding, the result being that *“the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart”* (13:19). Jesus may be referring to both the Pharisees who rejected his message and the towns that witnessed Jesus’ mighty deeds yet did not repent:

- “But the Pharisees said, ‘By the ruler of demons he casts out the demons.’” – 9:34.
- “Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.” – 11:20.

As to the *“seeds [that] fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil”* (13:5), Jesus likens them to *“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 arrives on account of the word, that person immediately falls away”* (13:20-21). Some in Israel respond to Jesus’ teaching with immediate enthusiasm, but faced with persecution or tribulation they fall away (*“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’”* – John 6:60). They are persons who *“are receptive to the message and even delight in it, yet their initial enthusiasm does not survive the experience of adversity and persecution.”* (Carroll).

The third group, the seeds that *“fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them”* (13:7), represent those who hear the word, but worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit: *“the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing”* (13:22). This recalls the warning Jesus gave his disciples about the worries of the world as well as the rich young man who walks away from Jesus because of his attachment to his many possessions:

- “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear ... but strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” – 6:25, 33.
- “Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell you possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” – 19:21-22.

After describing the seed that failed to produce that which it was intended, some seed *“fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty,*

some thirty.” (13:8). Jesus identifies this abundance as resulting from “*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*” (13:23). These are those persons who both hear and listen to Jesus’ Word; they are the good soil that will “bear fruit,” an image for the practical living out of one’s faithfulness to God. They are those persons who truly exemplify discipleship, who actively hear and listen to the Word of Jesus as the “*Word of eternal life*” (John 6:68) and living in obedience to Jesus’ teaching and commandments. They are those who understand that listening to the words of Jesus involves obedience; indeed, the word “obedient” comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means “listening.” As Jesus was obedient in his listening to the word of the Father, so also those who would be his followers are to lead the same lives of listening that results in obedient discipleship:

- “Jesus’ life was a life of obedience. He was always listening to the Father, always attentive to his voice, always alert for his directions. Jesus was ‘all ear.’ That is true prayer: being all ear for God. The core of all prayer is indeed listening, obediently standing in the presence of God.” – Henri Nouwen.

Jesus’ parable is bookended by command to listen: “*Listen! A sower went out to sow ... Let anyone with ears listen!*” (13:3, 9), a phrase that will later be used by John of Patmos when he commands the church in Thyatira to “*let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*” (Revelation 2:29). Like perceiving the advent of the kingdom in parables, recognizing the prophets of the kingdom requires discernment. We receive what Jesus did and said by hearing (“*Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.*” – Acts 2:33). The content of hearing (*akouein*) corresponds to that of what was heard. It is the reception of grace and the call to repentance in response to salvation and its ethical demand. Faith and obedience are the marks of real hearing, “*through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.*” (Romans 1:5-6).

- “Hearing spiritually is related to the concept of deep listening. Deep listening is the idea that we listen with compassion. We listen to understand and finally we listen with intention, specifically the intention to act ... Just as a teacher may instruct his/her students to listen closely because the material can be on the test, Jesus ends the parable by telling the crowd to listen not only to understand, but also to act on the teaching, to obey, and in this particular case,

to participate in the manifestation of God's kingdom in the world." – Jennifer T. Kaalund.

A few weeks after our hearing tests, we gathered in the school gymnasium for our regular physical education class with Mr. Johnson, who as always was in a cantankerous mood. As we were about to begin to play that day's game of volleyball, one of my classmates put up his hand and inquired of our teacher "*Mr. Johnson, may I ask you a question?*" Mr. Johnson's response was to assure the child that "*I'm all ears!*" While I have no idea whether or not he was a person of faith, this response is a perfect summary of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ: we need to be "all ears" in focusing all of our attention on the words of Jesus Christ which we believe are the very Word of God that "*became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). It means that we need to listen to the words of our Lord and Saviour with understanding and obedience, knowing that the words we hear are the words of eternal life. It means that we are to understand the commandment to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" to mean, in the teaching of Martin Luther, that "*we are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.*" (*Small Catechism*). It means that we strive as God's holy people to be a church that gathers to listen to God's Word with understanding and obedience, listening together that "*can free us from our competition and rivalry and allow us to recognize our true identity as sons and daughters of the same loving God and brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, and thus of each other.*" (Nouwen). May we be "all ears" for God, so that we may be the good soil that produces the abundant harvest of blessing for all people as we obediently listen and walk as children of the light of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.