

**“Listening to the Soil”**  
**Romans 8:1-11    Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23**

- In Chapter 12
  - Takes place on the Sabbath
  - Broke the Sabbath laws about working
  - Healed on the Sabbath
  - Accused of being the devil “Beelzebul” because he cast out demons
  - His family shows up thinking that Jesus had gone too far and wanting to talk some sense into him, but Jesus refuses to listen to them.

When Jesus says “Let anyone with ears, listen” he is touching a sore point with me. Growing up my younger brother never tired of reminding me that my ears were a little out of proportion, a little larger than the rest of my head and, unlike most other people’s ears that always seemed to be neatly tucked up against the side of their head, my ears stuck out. My brother loved to say things like, “Here comes Bimbo the flying elephant!” I think I’ve gotten over the insecurity attached to that, but I am on the cusp of dealing with a hearing issue that is not going to go away with age and that is some loss of hearing. Whenever I see someone wearing hearing aids these days, I want to interview them to get their advice on the plusses and minuses of various types of hearing aids. I am learning that they are one of those devices that seem to fit into the category of “you can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.” Especially when I find myself in a conversation in a place like a noisy restaurant I often find myself cupping my ears. I think I’m just about there.

But we are not here to talk about either my big ears or my difficulty in hearing. But the parable of the sower more than anything else is a parable about listening for and hearing God’s word. Hebrews tells us that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” Listening is central to faith. Listening is a very personal, very immediate form of communication. This is especially important when we think in terms of listening for the word of God. It is important because in this age we live in we far more often think in terms of God’s word as something we read, not listen to. It has not always been so.

In fact, before the invention of the printing press, it was very rare for anyone to read God’s word. The word of God was always listened to. Reading and listening are not the same thing. They involve different senses. In listening we use our ears; in reading we use our eyes. We listen to the sound of a voice, we read marks on a page. These differences are significant and have very important consequences. Listening is an interpersonal act; it involves two or more people in fairly close proximity. Reading involves one person with a book written by someone who can be miles away or centuries away and long dead, or both. The

listener is required to be attentive to the speaker and is more or less at the speaker's mercy. For the reader it is quite different, since the book is at the reader's mercy. It may be carried around from place to place., opened or shut at whim, read or not read. When I read a book the book does not know if I am paying attention or not; when I listen to a person the person knows very well whether I am paying attention or not. In listening someone else takes the initiative; when I read I take the initiative. I can read by myself; I cannot listen by myself. In listening the speaker is in charge; in reading the reader is in charge.

Our faith has always been that God's creative word is spoken, even beginning in the act of creation God said, "Let there be ....." The central affirmation of the Torah begins with a command to listen, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One" Listening for God's word is central and never to be taken for granted or taken lightly. It is in the context of focused, centered listening that we are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our mind and all our strength. But scripture is also never naïve about how difficult it is for us to listen attentively without our critical nature providing a running commentary or without us subtly devising all kinds of strategies to ignore what is being said to us.

Eugene Peterson points out a very cunning image that is used in Psalm 40:6 which literally reads in the Hebrew, "ears thou hast dug out for me." Most translations prefer to refer to open ears rather than using the Hebrew verb which literally means "dug out."<sup>1</sup> The image can cause us to try to imagine what a human head would look like with no ears. A blockhead kind of potato head is what I imagine. Eyes, nose, and mouth, but no ears. This image in Psalm 40 is used in the context of bustling religious activity, lots going on, but no one is listening to the voice of God. These people had read scripture. They were following all the instructions, but had missed what was most vital. God was speaking but no one had ears to listen, or perhaps it wasn't that they didn't have ears so much as it was that their ears had gotten cluttered up with all the noise of culture, all the listening to gossip, all the chatter that goes on and on. Perhaps their ears were just so clogged that they could not hear God speak. But God redigs the ears trashed with audio junk, and the result? The result follows in verse 8, "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

It has been suggested that the parable of the sower is the gateway parable to all the others. It is the only parable that Jesus ever explains; it is a parable about listening to and hearing God's word.<sup>2</sup> But before we look more directly at it I want to refer to two quotations that emphasize the personal nature of listening.

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<sup>1</sup> Working the Angles by Eugene Peterson. Page 101.

<sup>2</sup> This is actually not accurate! A mistake by this preacher. See next weeks gospel about the field with both wheat and weeds, followed by another explanation.

The first is this, “before the listener can become a listener something must happen to him: he must expect.”<sup>3</sup> Last week Christine did a wonderful job of helping us to hear Jesus invitation of “Come to me all you that are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” She emphasized Jesus’ desire for us to have the faith to be in a place of comfort, “Are you comfortable?” she said. It is a particular kind of comfort. It is the kind of comfort that frees us to expect that we will be able to listen, really listen by faith with our whole self. We listen because by faith we expect that God is fully present to us and by faith consent to that presence.

The second quote is this, “You can’t hear God speak to someone else, you can hear him only if you are being addressed.”<sup>4</sup> Listening to God is more about people than principles. Listening to God is more about communities of faith than doctrines and rituals. It is personal and prophetic; God speaks to our heart because God seeks to shape our character and transform our relationships in a kingdom shaped way.

In the parable of the sower the word of God is the seed. There is no shortage of seed in this parable; there is an abundance of seed. In fact, the sower seems almost reckless in his sowing; he is just reaching in his bag of seed and flinging it out with what seems like reckless abandon, yet as free as he is with the seed there is never any doubt that this seed is precious and potent; it is full of potential. Yet as potent as is this seed, much of it seems to go to waste because of a lack of listening, a lack of hearing.

Jesus explains the seed that falls on the hardened path as those who hear the word of the kingdom but do not understand. This is a particular kind of understanding, it is an understanding of the heart. This is different than understanding so that you can pass a test; it is a different kind of understanding than reading an instruction manual on how to put your new computer together; the heart is the seat of our will so an understanding of the heart is one that transforms how we make our choices and how we live our lives. We hear the word, but we don’t listen to the word as having an influence on who I am or who God wants me to be.

Jesus then talks about the seed that falls on the rocky ground. I am reminded that I actually know very little about growing things from seed at all. I actually think most of us are like that; when we are looking to buy a plant we want to see what the plant looks like so there are plant nurseries where the plants are already growing. Growing from seed is a very delicate operation because seeds sprout best in shallow soil, but in order to thrive, in order to grow and mature, they must be transplanted into soil with real depth where their root system can develop and expand and become deep and wide.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. page 131

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. page 137.

Jesus explains very clearly that listening to the word of the kingdom requires on-going attentiveness and steadfast patience on our part so that when trouble and persecution come, not IF they come, but when they come, we will not be discouraged and wither away. There will be a root of strength to sustain us. Growing roots is not a spectacular thing to do. There are no shortcuts. There are no visible consolations. What it asks of us is humble patience and faith in God's steadfast love.

Jesus then talks about the seed that falls among the thorns. There is no lack of hearing here; it is just that the word of the kingdom is drowned out by the incessant volume of the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. What does Jesus have against wealth?

Perhaps this story will illustrate. One day a man who was very unhappy and suspicious of the motives of others went to see a rabbi. He told the rabbi that although he had more than he needed he was frustrated and unhappy. He was miserable. The rabbi led him to the window of his modest house and asked him to look out the window. "What do you see?" asked the rabbi. The rabbi lived in the middle of a bustling town so the miserable man said, "I see men and women and children." The rabbi then led the man over to a mirror, and asked him to look into the mirror. "Now what do you see?" The man replied, "I see myself."

The rabbi then explained, "Behold, in the window there is glass and in the mirror there is also glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a layer of silver. As soon as the silver is added we begin to lose sight of others and see only ourselves."

The cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word of the kingdom because, even though the God's word must be heard with our heart, even though we are asked to listen with our whole person, it is never just about us.

Sometimes when I get home in the evening I am just about filled up and fed up with listening. What I really want to do is to turn on the television with the remote control in my hand and, as they say, "Veg out." But I happen to be blessed to live with this other remarkable person, and often she wants to talk to me, and then I have to make a choice. It is a little choice, but just because it is little does not mean that it is not significant.

Listening to the word of God asks the same choice of us. Are we willing to be moved from concern about me to attentiveness to thee? Are we willing to be moved outside of ourselves, to move beyond ourselves?

Jesus doesn't say much about the good soil except to say that it understands; it is a humble understanding, accepting life as it is trusting in God's grace and depending upon the potency of God's word and each day seeking to surrender anew to all that God would bless us with.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
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