

Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost Proper 10A – July 12, 2020

Isaiah 55:10-13

Romans 8:1-11

Psalm 65:1, 9-13

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Grace to you and peace, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Wasn't it a strange thing for Jesus to say when he told the crowd: "Let anyone with ears listen!" After all, everyone there had ears, so what did he mean?

But those ancient hearers would have recognized in his words the echo of the Sh'mah – the ancient Jewish prayer, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord alone." (Dt. 6:4) And it would have brought back the words of Moses: "But you shall return, and hear (or obey, *shamah*) the voice of the Lord thy God, and shall do all the commandments which I command you this day" (Dt. 30:8). It would also have brought to mind the warnings of the prophets of old like Jeremiah and Ezekiel: "Son of man, you live among rebels who have eyes but refuse to see. They have ears but refuse to hear. For they are a rebellious people. (Ezek. 12:2)

So, this order from the lips of Jesus had historical weight to it.

But we're far removed from those historical references. We know that people have ears and, therefore, we assume that they hear what is said in their presence. But people don't always listen when they hear, do they? That thought reminded me of my mother. I used to be amazed at what happened when she was reading a good book. I could speak to her, call to her, even drop something in another room, and she'd continue reading as if I hadn't made any sound at all. The only way I could catch her attention was to stand directly in front of her and wait for her to surface from the world of her book. If I touched her, it would frighten her and cause her to jump, so I'd just be patient and wait for her attention to shift.

My mother certainly had ears, and she could hear, all the while not listening. And interestingly (and amusingly) she only rarely complained about her husband not listening to her when she spoke.

It's curious that Jesus gives his instruction after he's finished telling the parable that is our gospel text today. Since he didn't warn the people in advance, did that mean that anyone who wasn't paying careful attention was just out of luck?

Possibly so, but I think that Jesus was actually taking the burden off of the hearers.

Nowhere in this passage – not in the initial telling nor in the explanation to the disciples in the second part of it – does Jesus suggest that the hearers themselves are in control of how they hear.

“You who have ears to hear, listen!” is not a moral imperative, as though we are capable of hearing by sheer force of will. And to relate hearing to the terms of Jesus’ parable, we’re not able to be “good soil” simply through determination.

No, and it’s not a moral judgment, either, as though we are to infer that we are in some way responsible for being like the hard path that can’t provide a fertile bed for seed sown on it. And we needn’t feel guilty if we don’t understand something Jesus teaches. There’s a great tradition of people not understanding Jesus, isn’t there?

Jesus is simply describing the way things are – in any group of hearers, there are some who don’t pay attention at all, there are some who are quick to adopt something they’ve heard, but who can’t follow through, there are some who are initially interested, but then have other priorities that get in the way of sticking with what they’ve heard, and then there are some who take to heart what they’ve heard and put it into action.

That’s just the way it is. The disciples will become sowers of God’s word so they need to know this. They should anticipate that their future audiences won’t universally welcome Jesus’ message.

And, as we will see in the next several weeks Jesus told this parable at the beginning of a series of seven parables that for us are Matthew 13, so he is giving notice to disciples who will hear that they should listen. His disciples in the days of his life on earth, as well as us, 2020 years later. Seen in this light, “You who have ears to hear, listen!” becomes an opportunity for those who had not been paying attention, those who had been apathetic, those who had been concentrating on their children or their neighbors to stop and listen, really listen, to what’s coming next.

We know that God’s word has power to accomplish what it says. That’s how creation occurred. And as Jesus exclaims the imperative, “Listen!” the Holy Spirit is actually giving hearers ears to hear and hearts of good soil in which God’s word will grow.

The Spirit uses Jesus' words to turn the hearts of some people, to strengthen others, and to bring forth fruit from still others. For even if some people have completely missed the parable of the Sower, they have now heard Jesus' call to listen to the rest of the parables – the ones that begin, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”. We'll consider some of them in coming weeks.

This action of the Holy Spirit is a Pentecost experience – the Spirit goes forth with the word of God so that there is actual understanding, not simply the registering of sounds. And disciples' understanding leads to obedience because of who is speaking.

Where there is understanding – where hearers are permitted by God's grace to recognize in Jesus the very first fruits of the new creation (1 Cor. 15) – then their fruit will be forthcoming, as well, just as surely as ears of corn grow from stalks or peaches fall from trees.

Jesus makes clear that neither the sowers nor the hearers are in control of the outcome of the listening experience. It is the Holy Spirit that brings forth the fruit in those to whom God has given ears to hear: some will have a small harvest; some a modest harvest; and some will enjoy an abundant harvest – as God determines.

Fruit-bearing is not a competition, as though someone is better because she or he has greater abilities than someone else to bear fruit. No – all of the harvest is of God, in accordance with what God has apportioned to each hearer.

Our prayer, then, is for God to open our ears to understand, to receive the seed of God's word into our hearts and minds, and to put that word into action in our everyday lives.

This morning, it is fairly easy to be like a member of the crowd at the lakeside where Jesus was teaching. We heard God's word being read, and now we have heard it proclaimed for our greater understanding.

But what about tomorrow? How will we use our ears to listen during each day of the week between Sundays? Because it's not just Jesus to whom we need to listen. If we are to be effective in sharing the Gospel, we need to be able to hear where the people we speak to are at the time we encounter them. We have to be able to speak in terms that are meaningful to them, treating them with the respect to which they are entitled, so that we meet them as sisters or brothers created by God, and for whom Christ died. This is especially so today when old patterns are rightfully being abandoned and equality of being is sought.

And we don't have to wait for Jesus to come down to the lakeshore, or into the church building to share the Gospel with other people. We have Bibles, or smartphones with a Bible app, computers, iPads, and other devices with whole libraries of scripture or even devotional books with scripture in them. And if anyone present today doesn't have access to scripture in any form, let me know before you leave the service.

Each day as we open God's word, Jesus speaks to us and calls us to listen and to put his teaching into action. In this way we, like Jesus' first disciples, are hearers who are made sowers, spreading the message of the kingdom of God coming into our world.

In Luther's catechism, in the section on the Lord's Prayer, we learn that "God sent His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil, and to bring us to Himself, and to govern us as a King of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end He has also bestowed His Holy Spirit, who is to bring these things home to us by God's holy Word, and to illumine and strengthen us in the faith by Christ's power.

"Therefore we pray ...that this may become effective with us, and that Jesus' name be so praised through the holy Word of God and a Christian life that we who have accepted it may abide in it and daily grow in it, and that it may gain acceptance and adherence among other people and proceed with power throughout the world. In this way, many may find entrance into the Kingdom of Grace and be made partakers of redemption, being led thereto by the Holy Spirit, in order that thus we may all together remain forever in the one kingdom now begun."

God's reign comes "when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his Holy Word and lead a godly life here in time and hereafter in eternity."

God's reign comes to us when the Spirit gives us ears to hear God's word and the ability to listen to that word and live by it.

God's will is done when all the hindrances to the seed thriving and bearing fruit are removed and we are good soil for God's word.

This is Jesus' greatest desire for us – it is why his Spirit is with us when we worship, week after week, and in our out-of-church lives, day after day.

The Sower is here – speaking, feeding, giving himself fully to us. “You who have ears to hear, listen!”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **AMEN**