

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“If You Have Ears!”

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Matthew 13: 1-11, 16-23

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!’

10 Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’

¹¹ 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.

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ 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.

18 ‘Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ 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.’

People will often ask me about my home town. When I mentioned that I was raised in Stanton, more often than not a rather quizzical expression will come over their face. Most people don't know where Stanton is. They get it mixed up with Standish or Stanwood. My strategy is to ask people if they know where Greenville or Ionia is. If this information doesn't help them, I settle for telling them it is around an hour northeast of Grand Rapids. This description isn't real precise but at least it answers the question.

I recall one day long ago when I was playing softball for my brother's team on a Sunday afternoon. In the middle of our game the driver of a large shiny automobile pulled up to the side of the road which ran beside our bench and asked if someone could give him directions to the town of Sidney. My brother, kind hearted soul that he is, walked over to help the man out. Sidney, if you don't already know, is actually a suburb of Stanton, a town with a bank and a bar and a general store. The gentleman in the car was a city slicker, probably from Lansing or Grand Rapids, and was clearly frustrated by the rural conditions. He said that he was lost and that all of the roads now looked the same and that many of the road signs were even missing. He didn't even know which direction he was heading. My brother calmly said, "Well, to get to Sidney you first have to get on Derby Lake Road. Do you know where Derby Lake is?" The gentleman in the car shook his head no. "OK then," my brother continued, "you could get there by turning right off M-66 at Rhodes Corner." Alas, the stranger didn't know what on continent Rhodes Corner was located. My brother tried again, "Go down here about three miles to the County Farm and turn right. Sidney is five miles north of that." Sadly the gentleman's next question was "What the heck is a County Farm?" My brother was now getting frustrated so a friend of his walked over and offered to help. He gave the man in the big car some rather specific directions about taking the next left, then the second right, and then the next two lefts. The gentleman repeated the instructions and then drove away happy, even though he had not yet realized that all of those turns would take him far from Sidney. All of us who knew that started laughing. Us country boys had pulled a joke on a city slicker. My brother's friend, who later became the sheriff of Montcalm County justified his action by saying, "Nobody could help that guy. He was completely ignorant. You have to know something in order to get to Sidney!"

If you have ever lived in a small town, you know that this story is true. When Laura and I lived in central Illinois, in the midst of the corn and pigs and soybeans, I was always searching for a shortcut to the hospitals on the north side of Peoria. All of the farmers in my congregation told me to take the Valley Blacktop. This made little sense to me. First of all, none of the roads in that county had names or street signs so there was nothing officially labeled "The Valley Blacktop." Secondly, contrary to what city slickers might think, many of the roads in rural Illinois are paved with blacktop so this designation did not narrow the choices by much. Finally, as hard as I tried, I couldn't find a hill much less a valley. The terrain was a flat as a pancake. I could never begin to figure out what those farmers were talking about. I feared that after they finished talking to me they just went around the corner and laughed at me. I was the ignorant one. You had to know something in order to drive on the Valley Blacktop!

Sometimes we have to know something already in order to be able to learn something new. It is impossible for me to describe to my lovely wife a unique play that has just occurred in a Tigers game because she does not know anything about the squeeze play, a Texas Leaguer, or the infield fly rule. Perhaps you have tried to understand the deep message of an award winning foreign film. Even if you can read the subtitles, you are at some advantage if you first speak the language. If you are not already computer literate, sometimes it does little good for someone else to attempt to tell you how to fix your machine. You first need to know how to operate the computer. Fresh information is more useful when laid upon the framework of experience. In life,

sometimes you just have to know something in order to be able to get to Stanton or Sidney or the Valley Blacktop or the Kingdom of God.

I think that Jesus understood the deep meaning of this simple truth. In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, a chapter that contains seven parables, Jesus explains the meaning of his peculiar teaching style. "Why do you speak in parables?" his disciples asked. Jesus knew that his followers wanted to quickly decipher for themselves the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven. He understood that they wanted to be able to clearly define where God was working in their lives and in their world. But he said that in order to learn these things, his followers needed to know something else about God first. They would first need eyes to see and ears to hear. Jesus knew that only those who first had some understanding of God's love and ways would be able to comprehend the message he was teaching.

Look at the Scripture lesson more closely. First of all, Jesus tells the parable of the sower. What is that? It is a lesson in elementary agriculture. It is a simple and rather obvious tale about planting seeds in different kinds of soil. It is kind of like a story about watering your flowers. We understand what we have to do and why we do it. It just doesn't seem to be information of vital importance. Yet Jesus hints that there is a hidden message there. He says, "Listen then, if you have ears."

The disciples are still perplexed. "We understand your stories. But why do you teach this way? Why can't you just tell us what you mean?" Jesus explanation is rather complex, but it boils down to this I think: "I tell parables to the crowds because they hear them and don't get them. I tell parables to you and you understand. Because you understand, I can tell you even more." Because the disciples know something, they are able to learn something more. Because they they know something, a simple story of life, an everyday parable about something as unimportant as planting seeds, becomes an important lesson about life in the Kingdom of God.

I recall my first Christmas in Utah. The radio station there all played a song about the twelve days of Christmas in Utah, with all sorts of references to green jello, funeral potatoes, missionary bicycles and apricot trees, things I did not understand at all. My secretary would laugh hysterically each time the song was played. I didn't get it. But eight years later I understood the humor. I still didn't think it was very funny and I turned it off whenever it came on the radio, but I understood it. So it was for a large percentage of Jesus' listeners. They did not know enough about what he was saying to truly understand the message he was speaking.

Where does that leave us? It would seem that the message of this lesson is that we must believe in the Kingdom of God, open our eyes to the truth of its vision in the midst of life, and have ears to expectantly listen for its arrival. We must believe and know what we are looking for and listening for before we can hope to see, hear, understand, and trust. If we believe in what Jesus teaches us about God's way, and if we begin to align our lives to those precepts, then we will come to see and hear in greater clarity, other truths about God what we first did not understand.

Perhaps Jesus taught in parables because a parable was a perfect example of God's Kingdom in itself. If you like hearing parables, meaningful lessons become crystal clear. If you don't like parables, they appear to be foolish tales, mundane stories, or wild exaggerations that waste one's time. If you believe in the Kingdom of God and can find an experience of it in the midst of your life, you can trust Jesus' teachings about

righteousness, forgiveness, mercy and love. If you are skeptical of the Kingdom of God and can't find the experience of it in your midst, you will probably find Jesus' teachings to be rather naïve, an outlook for losers, or an invitation for disaster. To comprehend more about the faithfulness of our God, we must first have faith in the goodness of God.

Perhaps that is why we come here to worship. Ours is not a low maintenance faith. It needs on-going, loving, informed attention. We want to have ears! We know something about the presence of God but we desire to learn more. We want to align our lives to Jesus so that we can further understand what he might be saying to us today. We want to worship and serve and study so that our hearing and vision will be keen to the word and truth of God that is always around us. We are here because we know something and we want to help each other understand something even greater.