“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

There’s an exercise I sometimes do with couples who are preparing for their wedding, and sometimes with couples who have come in to talk about issues in their marriage. I also found myself using it with my children as they were growing up, and yes, I’ve imposed it on myself as well.

It’s a simple exercise. One person speaks; the other listens. When the speaker finishes speaking, the listener is not allowed to respond until he or she says back to the speaker what he or she heard to the speaker’s satisfaction. It doesn’t have to be verbatim – in fact, it is better if it is not – it just needs to convince the speaker that he or she has been heard. Easy, right?

Not so much. Engaging in this exercise, especially when the conversation is difficult or there is conflict involved, quickly reveals what Jesus’ simple proclamation makes clear: there is a difference that can be as wide as the sea between hearing and listening.

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

James Martin, in the book that is the basis for this sermon, describes how Jesus may have had other reasons than just the crowd for being in a boat on the water. Sound carries on water in ways it doesn’t on land, so much so that you can often hear conversations from across a lake being carried on in normal tones. Jesus is speaking to be heard, not just overheard, and so it is likely everyone could hear, clearly.

But not everyone could listen.
This is in the end a parable about listening to the Word of God, sown like seed from God’s gracious hand. Jesus describes a scene any person living in that region would know. A sower went out to sow. The method of planting seeds in that region and at that time was to broadcast the seeds. The sower reaches his hands into a bag strapped around his neck and flings the seeds in a wide arc. Later, he will plow the seeds into the soil.

But in that region of Galilee, there were no guarantees how the seed would fare. And at that point in the telling, James Martin suggests, Jesus looks around and sees a typical scene, one that Martin himself was looking upon as he stood at the Bay of Parables, likely the exact spot where this event occurred. All around him he saw good soil, thorny brambles growing in spots, rocky outcroppings, a pathway through it to the sea, and, flying overhead, birds.

They are quite literally standing inside the parable at that moment, with Jesus pointing out what is all around.

Some seed falls on the pathway just like the one the crowds walked down to get to the shore, and the birds snatch it away before it can even take root. For some, the word of God, the way of Christ in the world, never has a chance to penetrate a hard heart or a closed mind. Sometimes it is out of fear of change, or pride, or stubbornness, but many move about the world as if encased in asphalt, a hard exterior through which no new thought can penetrate.

I observed a Facebook exchange the other day over a political topic in which one person accused the other of betraying his principles because of a position he was taking. “You’ve always said this, and now you’ve changed to that.” His friend replied, “Yes, I did used to say that, but I’ve changed my position.” “Why?” asked his increasingly incredulous friend. “Because I have thought about it and entertained the possibility that I might be wrong.” As their conversation continued, it became clear that for the offended friend, entertaining the possibility of being wrong was just not possible.

Jesus is still sowing seeds, and the life he calls us to is one of change, of humility, of community where we bump up against other people with whom we may not always agree. If we are as hard as concrete, those seeds bounce around, come to rest, and eventually become food for the birds.
When I got ready to go to divinity school, the good people at the small church I was serving at the time said to me, “Don’t go up there to Vanderbilt and let them change you.” Wait. So, I was to go to a school that will cost thousands of dollars, be exposed to the thought of thousands of years of Judaism and Christianity – theology, Bible, pastoral care, etc. – and come out of that unchanged? Walk through those hallways with my mind made up? Well, sometimes it happens that way – we walk through our schools, our work lives, our marriages, our friendships, our faith, with our mind made up, never yielding.

Let those with ears to hear listen!

Some seed falls on rocky ground. The grain springs up quickly, but there’s no depth of soil, no way for the roots to penetrate beyond just the thinnest surface. Everything looks good at first, but the first sunny and hot day, it shrivels for lack of depth.

I will never forget sitting in class in divinity school and listening to Dr. Mary Anne Tolbert lecture on this parable. She had just written a new book called “Sowing the Gospel,” and in it she argues that this parable in Mark serves as a kind of table of contents for the rest of the gospel. We are supposed to be able to recognize all the people Jesus will encounter throughout the gospel and see which of the four types of soil they fall into. For rocky soil, she said, you need look no further than the man Jesus named “the rock,” Peter.

Is there a better example of one who springs up quickly, who enthusiastically embraces the Word, but then almost immediately shuts down any other interpretation of that word than his own? Peter is the first one to confess Jesus as the Messiah, only to chastise Jesus like a child when he says the Messiah must suffer and die. On the night Jesus says someone will betray him, Peter announces he will die for him, only to be told he will deny him three times. Peter refuses to have his feet washed, but when Jesus says if he does not wash him he can have no part with him, Peter demands to have his head and hands washed as well. Peter, the rock. He springs up quickly, but on that night when the sun of torture and hate beat down on Jesus, Peter withered, and denied he knew him.

When we find ourselves in the bright sunlight of trouble – sickness, conflict, death, despair; when we find ourselves faced with difficult moral choices that may force us to draw upon depths of soil far beyond the surface of things, we need more than the quick
springing up of easy religion. We will need to plumb the depths of tradition, the deeps of the Bible, the fervency of prayer, the discipline of study.

I’ve met my share of people who tell me that they prefer the old-time religion of their childhood, who have a sentimental regard for the faith as they learned it long ago, and who have not sought out growth in faith – preferring a kind of “the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it” mentality. I go away from those encounters praying that it will be enough for them, that it will be enough when the hot sun comes out.

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Now Jesus casts his vision to the brambles growing on the hillside overlooking the sea. Some seed falls among thorns, the thorns prove to be more than the grain can overcome, and it is choked. Jesus met many such people in his ministry – most prominently the rich young ruler, who, when he asked what he must do to inherit eternal life and is told he lacks one thing, turns and walks away saddened. The one thing he lacked was to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor.

I am reminded of the interaction between Jesus and Martha that was told so well at Vacation Bible School this week. When Martha becomes upset with Mary for sitting at Jesus’ feet and listening while she does all the work, Jesus responds, “Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things. One thing is needful, and Mary has chosen the better part.”

What is the one thing? To listen to the word. And yet, we can become distracted not just by wealth and all the things that come with it, but by our work, our various pursuits, our sheer busyness. When our calendars become too full for us to stop and listen, for God, and to one another, they are like weeds, choking out our lives. We can also become distracted by more insidious things – jealousy, petty grudges, hatreds large and small – all of them threatening to wrap themselves around our souls.

As I look at this parable, it becomes clear to me that it is far too superficial a reading to see these types of soil as applying fully only to certain people. I agree with Martin that all of us contain all these kinds of soil within ourselves. There are aspects of my life where I wear armor so no word can get through, and places in my heart and mind that lack depth sufficient to the scorching sun, and distractions in my daily life that can leave my soul depleted and withered.
The real good news of this parable is that it is not about us and what we do, but about what God is doing. Through the Spirit God is the one who tills the soil, breaks up the hard ground, removes the rocks, clears out the thorns, so that we might be good soil, yielding grain in abundance. It is God’s grace, and God’s grace alone, that can make of our jumbled hearts good, rich, verdant ground. This may not always feel like pleasant work – we can become rather fond of the stones and thorns. But God desires for us so much more – life, abundant and free.

The parable is an invitation. I do not know how you came in here today, whether you feel like good soil, yielding grain; or whether you feel shriveled or choked, or a combination of all. What I do want you to know, is that no matter how you came, what is on offer in this place, in Christ, is grace – unearned, extravagant, and for all.

Can you hear the invitation, by the sea, carrying across the waters? Can you hear it?

Let those with ears to hear listen! Amen.