

Do You Hear?

Mark 4:1-34

John Breon

Everybody loves a good story. We can get caught up in a novel and read it in a couple of days. We return to a good story over and over again. "Tell that one about the time...." We listen to stories or watch them until we have them memorized. There's no telling how many times our kids watched some of their videos when they were little. They had lots of children's books, but there were some that they liked to hear over and over. I've heard women (and some men) talk about "listening to my story" instead of saying "watch a soap opera."

Jesus taught in parables, which are sayings, comparisons, figures of speech and, often, stories. Stories affect us in ways that lists of facts don't. It's the difference between basketball players citing stats or talking about what happened in the game. We respond to stories differently than we do rule books. Now, the Bible—including Jesus' teaching— isn't all in story form. It includes many forms of communicating that are valid and important. Story is simply one of the ways God speaks his word to us.

The gospel appeals to us and calls for our response at various levels: mind, emotion, and will. These can't be separated. They're each vital for a whole and healthy human being and for a whole and healthy response to Jesus and his message.

Stories and parables are a way of involving us at all these levels. They probably appeal mainly to our emotional side—they touch us and we respond. They also can have intellectual content. Some people can remember a story better than they can something they hear in another form of teaching. Or a story may move us to make a decision or take some action. Jesus wants all of these responses from us, so he uses a variety of ways to communicate and to make his appeal.

Jesus' parables use objects, experiences, relationships, and activities that were part of the everyday, ordinary life of the people listening to him. Through these familiar references, Jesus expressed truth about God and God's kingdom. One thing this tells us is that we can look for God's

presence and listen for God's speaking in the everyday, ordinary and familiar stuff in our lives.

There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak—even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys. We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned into pillars of longing and regret, but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music. Sometimes we avoid listening for fear of what we may hear, sometimes for fear that we may hear nothing at all but the empty rattle of our own feet on the pavement. But...“be not afraid...for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him.
(Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* 77-78)

This section of Mark's gospel introduces Jesus' teaching in parables. It opens with what Mark probably saw as the ideal parable: “The Sower and the Soils.” There's also an explanation of Jesus' use of parables and Jesus' interpretation to his disciples of “The Sower and the Soils.”

The next short sayings tie in to the theme of hearing and revealing. Then come two more short parables that are also about seeds.

Before we hear the parables themselves, let's notice a couple of things. First, these are parables of the kingdom. Like most of Jesus' parables, they tell us something about the kingdom of God—its nature, how it's making its appearance in the world, and how we're to live in it.

In his explanation to the disciples, Jesus says, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.” The disciples are insiders. They're in on the kingdom of God, God's heavenly rule breaking through on earth in Jesus. They're part of the kingdom's mission and are entrusted with its

message. That's part of what discipleship is about. We need to be called and committed to follow Jesus not just so we can interpret the parables but so we can be part of the mysterious working of God's kingdom. Faith is needed to perceive revelation. And the revelation can't be understood apart from faith.

Second, there are outsiders who don't see Jesus as the One bringing God's kingdom. Jesus speaks to them in parables so that their blindness and deafness will be revealed. Jesus doesn't intend to shut out certain people, but he knows that without careful, attentive listening people won't perceive him correctly. He repeats, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (vv. 9, 23). He says, "Consider carefully, or, pay attention to what you hear" (v. 24). And Mark concludes, "He spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand" or "as they were able to hear it" (v. 33).

So the parables don't always make the truth clear. Sometimes they wrap it up so you have to seek it and get further help from Jesus to understand it. The disciples needed Jesus to help them understand what he was saying. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present to teach us and help us understand and respond.

...it is easier, less disturbing, less painful not to hear. Hearing certainly involves character. Those who choose to be small, petty, mean, and self-centered seem unable to grasp the big words of the faith, to sing the songs of Zion, to catch the vision of a world at peace before God. In order to hear the whisper of revelation, one must still have the capacity, however abused since Eden, to recognize the voice. (Fred Craddock, *Preaching* 59)

In the parable of the Sower and the Soils, Jesus is talking about what's happening in his ministry. As he spreads the word, the message, the gospel of the kingdom, he finds people responding in various ways. As Jesus embodies the kingdom of God, he meets various kinds of resistance. But there are also people who respond positively and follow him.

The image Jesus uses here was very common in ancient Israel. A farmer planted by walking through the field, scattering seed by hand. The

seed was usually scattered on the ground and then plowed under. And some seed fell on the path where the birds snatched it up. Some fell on rocky soil where it sprouted quickly, but when the sun came up, the plants withered because they didn't have roots. Some fell among thorns that choked the young plants. And some seed fell on good ground where it grew and yielded a crop—30, 60, or 100 times what was sown. A harvest ten times what was planted was considered great at that time. Jesus is indicating an abundant harvest.

As he interprets this for the disciples, Jesus says that the sower sows the word. That's what Jesus was doing. He was spreading the message of God's kingdom. He still is. And some people's hearts are hard. The message doesn't sink in and Satan quickly snatches it away.

Some people hear the word gladly, but they are shallow. They quickly fall away or stumble (are scandalized) when trouble or persecution comes.

Others hear the word, but the message and their living it out get choked by the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and desires for other things. These things aren't bad in themselves. Life is a gift from God. Wealth can be used for God's purposes. God created the world that includes these other things. But we need to have right priorities. We need to focus on God's word first. We need to keep a first focus on the word (Joe Dongell, *The Gospel of Mark. The Biblical Journey* DVD).

Finally, some hearts are like good soil. These people hear and respond. The word grows in them. They become people of the kingdom and bear the kingdom's fruit. That good soil can be found in lots of people in lots of places. Just like different kinds of gardens produce fruit in their own ways, different churches proclaim the kingdom and bear the kingdom's fruit in different ways. But the goal is the same: a harvest of righteousness, peace, love, and joy.

Notice the first three kinds of soil fail to bear fruit. There's failure, failure, failure. But the soil that bears fruit bears three amounts of fruit. There's success, success, **SUCCESS!** (Dongell)

We all experience these various ways of hearing and responding in our lives. We sometimes listen only with our ears, like in much polite conversation. But we don't remember much of what was said. It goes in one

ear and out the other. Sometimes we listen with our minds only. Maybe we hear a great speaker and we're impressed with what's said, but we don't act on it. It's just something to think about or talk about. Sometimes we hear with intentions of following up. Maybe we hear an appeal on TV or online for some ministry that's helping people. We intend to make a donation, but then the phone rings or we see our overdraft or any of a number of things distracts us.

But there are times when we hear with all we've got and we respond, we act. There's a tornado warning—it's coming right through town. Or there's a phone call telling us we'd better come to the emergency room. You're suddenly listening intently. Everything about you is involved in hearing and responding.

When I was in grade school I listened to KCMO radio out of Kansas City. It was a "Top 40" station. They did the news and weather. They had actual DJs. Sometimes the station held contests and drawings. They once had a "Famous Person Contest." You sent in your name and address and if you heard your name on the air, you had a certain number of minutes to call in. As a now famous person you won some prizes and got your name in a drawing to win a trip or something.

I entered the contest. And one morning as I was getting up (it was summer so I didn't have to go to school), I heard the Famous Person jingle on the radio. I was listening. And then I heard this line in the jingle: "Get it on, John Breon in Appleton City." I rushed to the phone and dialed the number. It was busy. While I was waiting to call again, a friend down the street called to say they'd heard my name and wanted to make sure I'd heard. About that time, the door bell rang and another friend stopped by to make sure I'd heard.

I had heard and I responded. I finally got through and told the DJ who I was. He told me what I had won: a poster, a tee-shirt, and some gift certificates.

A few days later, I heard the same jingle with my name in it again. So I called again. The DJ explained that they did three names at a time and kept playing it till everyone called in. Over the next few days I heard the jingle

some more, but practically ignored it. I have no idea what the other two names were that were called along with mine. I wasn't listening for them.

When Jesus talks about hearing the word, accepting it, and producing a crop, he's talking about listening like when your name is on the radio and you need to call in to win. We listen to Jesus with all we have. We respond to Jesus with all we are.

The message of the kingdom, the identity of Jesus is meant to be made known. We're called to pay attention to who Jesus is and what he says.

He says to consider carefully what you hear. What you pay attention to now will lead to hearing and understanding more. If you refuse to listen and respond, you lose out.

We hear God's message, God's word in the Bible. We read it, we hear it, we study it, we hear messages based on it. The Holy Spirit uses the Bible to speak to us. The witness of other people is another channel the Holy Spirit uses to speak to us. There are many ways God uses to get through to us. As we hear, we need to respond. We trust the Lord, we commit to obey and that leads to more insight.

The other two seed parables here talk about the planting and the harvest. In between, something is happening. God is at work in ways we don't understand. It's not all up to us. We don't make it happen. We listen and obey and trust that God's power is working.

The mustard plant Jesus talks about has seed that looks like dust. From that tiny beginning, a large plant grows. It's kind of like Jesus planted himself as the seed. And it looked like nothing would come of it. But God raised Jesus from the dead. Then God poured out the Holy Spirit on the relatively small group of Jesus' followers. And the kingdom, the rule of God continues to be on the move. Its influence grows and spreads and brings in more and more people until the final harvest when Jesus returns.

However small a beginning the gospel has made in you, let it grow. Keep listening and responding to Jesus with your mind, your emotions, your decisions, your actions. Don't let the seed fall on hard ground. Don't be so shallow that it can't take root in you. Weed out those thorns. Ask God

to break up your hard heart and to take away the choking weeds. Be good soil. Give God the chance to do his gracious work in you.

And, join Jesus in sowing the message of the kingdom. Share the word with others. Scatter the seed. Trust God to give the growth and the fruit.