

Sermon Summary for 15-Nov-2009

Mark 4:1-20 / "Hearing the Gospel"

>> From the Bible

4:1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. 2 And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: 3 "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." 9 And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

10 And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. 11 And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, 12 so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."

13 And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?"

14 The sower sows the word. 15 And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. 17 And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. 18 And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, 19 but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. 20 But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." Mark 4:1-20

>> Notes

It's pretty much a given that we hear and listen differently based on the message, speaker, or just general circumstances. Consider the difference between how you hear the common pre-flight safety speech that flight attendants give, versus how you hear the words of your doctor discussing with you the results of a critical test. This dynamic is also at work in how we hear the gospel. So how is it that we need to be hearing the gospel, or even hearing each other?

Jesus uses an analogy of a farmer planting seeds to describe what life in God's Kingdom looks like. He uses the picture of a seed growing as the radical way in which the Kingdom of God works grows and works itself out into our lives and the world. If you were to compare the planting of a seed to dropping a huge boulder from a great height you would notice immediate differences. The boulder causes huge, rapid change — a cataclysmic effect on the ground where it landed. The seed does something quite different. When you first plant it, there is little change at all in the ground. But over time a pervasive, long-lasting change occurs that effects the soil itself and produces real life.

It is often the case that we would prefer the large-boulder effect of immediate and profound change. We want great radical transformation that no one can miss. Instead, the gospel comes as the seed planted that might be missed at first. But the changes that become evident over the long haul are real and lasting.

The key to this is how the message is heard. Jesus says in this parable, that we can hear the message of the gospel poorly. The first example is we mishear the gospel with a hard heart. There are those who hear the message of the gospel, but never let it penetrate. People can hear the story of the gospel, but say "No, that does not have my name on it. No, that sin is not mine, that pride is not mine, and that forgiveness is not mine." This can potentially be anyone, not just those angry or bitter. It can describe the well-scrubbed and polite too.

The second way to hear the gospel is with a shallow heart. There initially is some great acceptance of the gospel and joy in it (see vs. 5). But when suffering or even boredom comes, their faith withers away. This describes people who receive the gospel more as an emotional tonic — people who invite God into their kingdom to bless them (rather than the other way around). They receive it with great joy because of what may be in it for them. Often, this gives rise to a focus more on outward exuberance than inward change. But when our apparent lack of blessings never materializes, we can give up on our faith.

We also mishear the gospel with a divided heart (see vss. 7-8). There is some debate as to whether these people are true Christians. The first two categories in the parable don't seem to be. But this third category is a true Christian. But as Christians, they are controlled by the things of this life and their heart is divided — the deceitfulness of wealth, pleasure, etc. They are almost always anxious and lack assurance.

There is bigger issue here at work for us at our church. It is always good to be reminded that we can mishear the gospel. But what makes our church distinct from any other kind of movement or community that enjoys shared beliefs and life together? It must be that we hear the gospel proclaimed, taught, and heard. The bigger issue for our church is to remember that hearing the gospel is vital, and not optional. There are other means of grace (the sacraments of baptism & Lord's supper, and prayer), but we must recognize that the public preaching and hearing of the Word is an irreducible minimum to our faith and fellowship in Christ. We cannot isolate the other aspects of our life together (e.g. community groups, hymns and music, mercy and justice, etc.) from the necessity of hearing the gospel proclaimed and see it on display in the sacraments. And our hope is not in the abilities of the speaker, but in the Spirit of Christ who works in and through the means of public preaching. So that through these ordained means, we might be built up and encouraged in our faith and hope in the beauty of Christ as our Savior.

>> Questions for Discussion

- What are some ways that you tend to look for big, quick impact in your faith and in the lives of others? When that quick change doesn't happen or doesn't last, what happens to your view of yourself? Your view of others? Where in your life do you see most readily your impatience with gospel growth feeling more like a planted seed than a dropped boulder?
- In which areas of your life do you expect God to act like your genie (i.e. meeting your desires and wishes), as opposed to you being his follower and servant? How might the life and work of Christ begin to change and affect those expectations?
- The Psalmist often speaks of God's word as a delight and refreshment (Psalm 119). How does this compare with your attitude in reading God's word privately? In coming to public worship to hear God's word preached? What might account for the differences (either between the Psalmist and your own experience, or between your private and public experience)? What might you be able to do for God's word become more of a delight to you?