

Seeing and Hearing

Matthew 13:1-16

How many of you are into gardening? Most of you know that I grew up in Cumberland County in South Jersey, where there is still a lot of farm land. The home I lived in was not a farm, but we had 6 acres of land and my dad raised a pretty large garden. He loved to raise tomatoes, watermelons, cantaloupes, and many other vegetables. One of his biggest crops which required quite a bit of work was raising pole lima beans. You put up the poles and as the vines grow, you keep stringing them up along rows of wire or string. It was quite a project. Well, I guess I've inherited some of that interest in gardening...and although our gardens now are much smaller, Joanna and I still like to raise a few things like tomatoes and squash and beans. I think there is some personal satisfaction in watching plants grow and then enjoying the fruit or should I say vegetables of your labors. Well, I'm sure those of you who like to garden can appreciate that.

When Allison's husband, Scott was deployed for a 12 month assignment to Iraq, she wasn't sure how she and her two young children, Ethan and Esther were going to manage in those trying days. But Allison's mother came up with a plan that would help them through the coming months. She directed her grandchildren's attention to the trunk of her car.

"Just look!" Ethan said, pointing to the back of the car. Esther grabbed his mother's hand and brought her to the trunk. There she spotted it: a weeping cherry tree, magnificent even on its side, grand despite being wedged against a car seat.

"We're going to plant it and by the time Daddy comes home next year, it's going to blossom. He's going to be here to watch it bloom!" Ethan shouted, overcome with excitement.

Allison said: "I don't know how my mother, a woman with no military background herself, and who in fact pushed my stroller in countless antiwar rallies in the late 1960s, managed to come up with the perfect way for Ethan and Esther — and me — to think about the difficult year that stretched out in front of us. Just as our weeping cherry needs both sun and shade to thrive in its new home, my husband's current deployment has brought with it light and dark moments. During our long, snowy winter, I doubted our sapling would survive. It did. Now Memorial Day is here, marking for us the final few months of family separation. My mother was right: the promise of

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what's to come – the sweet, long-awaited blossoms of homecoming – urges us outside to count down each new day. Truly things planted in a garden can teach us lessons about life.

Today's Scripture lesson tells us of a gardener or farmer. We call it the parable of the sower. A man who scatters seeds and hopes to reap the benefits of his hard work.

This is one of the kingdom parables. Actually there are 7 of these in this section of Matthew. When Jesus is sharing these stories he offers them to help us understand what it means to live as part of the kingdom of God. So Jesus talks about wheat and weeds, mustard seeds, yeast, treasures, a pearl, a net. Everyday objects and images that Jesus' audience could relate to.

So let's go back to today's reading. It soon becomes apparent in reading this passage that this is lot about seeing and hearing. That it's possible to hear something, but not really listen, and to see something, but not really recognize it. It is sometimes said that we live in an attention deficit culture. That we are filled with a world of distractions. Kind of like watching someone take a text while sitting at the table and still trying to have a conversation. It's hard to stay focused. Would you agree or have you not been paying attention? Okay, I'll omit it happens in our household, I might be engrossed in watching a Phillies game and Joanna will be speaking to me and I might acknowledge that I'm hearing her, but in truth, I'm not really listening. It's like I pretend to hear and well I do hear her voice, but don't give me an exam on what she said. You can hear, but not really listen. And you can see, but not really see.

It makes me think of the story we often read after Easter when Jesus is walking on the road to Emmaus with two travellers. These travellers are amazed that this man who has joined them on the road has not heard about the recent events concerning Jesus' death. They are disheartened, feeling hopeless. And they did not know that it was Jesus walking with them. But what a wonderful thing it was when he broke bread with them and their eyes were opened. Then they realized why their hearts were burning within them, when he spoke of the Scriptures to them. Now they could see, their eyes were opened to see the Lord.

This morning I want to see and hear the connection of these senses to our spiritual life. That it is possible to see, but not really see, and hear but not really hear. What a tragic thing it is to have been given

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the opportunity to see Jesus, but not recognize how his life can impact your life. What a tragic thing to have been given the opportunity to hear the Word of God, but not really hear what it is saying to you. I guess what we're saying is that a person could come to church all their life, and see and hear, but not understand. A person could be exposed to all the claims of the Gospel, but never apply its truth. I love how the book of James reminds us:

"...humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says."

This is what we're talking about. Spiritual readiness and spiritual cultivation. Just as farmers get their fields ready for planting, so there are the things we can do to break up the soil of our hearts so that we can see and we can hear.

That's what this parable of the sower is all about. You have someone sowing seeds into various kinds of soil...a hardened path, shallow soil, among thorns and bushes and finally fertile soil. The encouraging thing about this parable is that we not only have Jesus' parable, we also have Jesus' interpretation of the parable. Jesus goes on to explain the parable in verses 18-23. I mean, I know there are times when we are not clear about the meaning of certain Scriptural passages, but this one is very clear. It was Mark Twain who said: "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." Because that's where the rubber meets the road. We understand the Word of God and see how we are to apply it to our daily lives.

So Jesus' parable is asking his hearers to examine their readiness of their hearts. And it asks you and me, what is the condition of our heart's soil? Are there things within us that are keeping us from seeing and hearing what God wants for us.

The first seed falls on a hardened path. The seed can not take root before the evil one snatches it away. I believe there are applications here not just for the one who is defiant before God. Sometimes we allow our hearts to harden. We know that God is speaking to us about taking a certain step, maybe reach out to someone we need to forgive or receive forgiveness, but we put it off, and eventually our hearts are hardened and we become unwilling to make things right. By not taking the steps we need to take we become less and less responsive to the voice of the Spirit speaking to our hearts. I wonder today if

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there are persons who feel like you allowed that to happen...but you are willing to let God break into that barrier and you are hearing the call to take the steps necessary to reach out to someone.

The second seed falls on shallow soil. The seed begins to take root, but the soil is too shallow, It hits the rocks below, the sun scorches the plant, and it withers and dies. It can happen to us when we are moved emotionally by the stirrings of the Spirit. We may be inspired by a sermon, a song, we go on a retreat, and we feel so close to God. But as the emotions fade, so does our ability to receive the Word of God. The seed hits rocks below the shallow soil. Who knows why we are unwilling to go deeper with the Lord. Maybe we're just afraid to go further in our faith, We're afraid of what God may be calling us to do. We're afraid to take those risks of faith. We're hesitant about the cost or the sacrifice that may be required. So our commitment to Christ is only on a superficial level.

The third seed falls among the thorns and as the plant grows it is choked by the thorns and bushes and so it cannot yield fruit. What a relevant picture for us as we live in a world that is constantly calling for our attention. Pulling us away from God's intentions for us. The pleasures of this world, the pursuit of wealth and success. All the things that would tempt us to take our eyes off of the Lord. It's the story of the Bible over and over again. The story of persons whose misdirected sight got them into trouble. David looking at Bathsheba. Lot's wife who looks back to the city of Sodom. Peter who takes his eyes off the Lord, and begins to sink into the sea. One of the saddest commentaries is written in the book of about a man that we know little about. His name is Demas. The Scripture simply says: Demas, who forsook the Lord's work having loved this present world. It can happen so easily, sometimes very subtly...when we try to live with our attention on the things of the world, its values, its attractions, rather than keeping our eyes on what is most important.

Picture the Lord Jesus who touched lives and gave sight to the blind..touching your eyes and ears this morning. God wants us to see and to hear, to receive from him all that God has for us. It requires a willingness of spirit and an openness of heart that Jesus says is like fertile soil...that good, rich soil that produces abundant fruit. One of the things we did last year when we planted our garden was to use some mushroom compost to make a much richer fertile soil. And it did

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make a difference. The plants looked much healthier and we had a lot of vegetables.

It's in that fertile soil God wants to plant the seed of his word in us. To be open to the Spirit of God, allowing whatever God wants to accomplish in us to happen. It requires fertile soil...a spiritual attentiveness. That we will pay attention to what God wants to say to us through his word, to be in tune with the voice of God's Spirit, to keep our focus on what God wants for you and me.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, once told the story about a flock of barnyard geese in Denmark. It seems that every Sunday, the geese would gather near the feeding trough and one of their number, a "preaching goose", would struggle up on the top rail of the fence and exhort the other geese about the glories of goosedom. He would tell them how wonderful it was to be a goose, rather than a chicken or a turkey. He would remind them of their great heritage and tell them of the marvelous possibilities in the future. And occasionally while he was preaching, a flock of wild geese, flying south from Sweden across the Baltic Sea on their way to sunny France, would fly overhead in a marvelous V-formation, thousands of feet in the air. When that happened all the geese would excitedly look and say to one another, "That's who we really are. We are not destined to spend our lives in this stinking barnyard. Our destiny is to fly." But then the wild geese would disappear from sight, their honkings echoing across the horizon. The barnyard geese would look around at their comfortable surroundings, sigh, and return to the mud and dirt of the barn. They never did fly.

Sometimes it's difficult to see beyond our current circumstances and realize that God has more for us to see. Sometimes we get distracted by the world, its voices, its messages and forget we are called to use our God-given gifts and imagination to make a difference in this world. As God scatters the seed of his word, let it fall on fertile soil. Let's hear again the word from the book of James: "...humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says."

Open your heart to receive that word, let that word take root in you, and take those steps of faith that will lead you to reach out to others and allow God to accomplish his purposes in your life.