

Message
January 22-23, 2011 – The Big Read
Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Luke 8:1-15
Let Anyone With Ears to Listen, Hear!

Gifted story teller and rabbi, Edwin Friedman teaches that a “colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change.” (Friedman’s Fables) Communicating a message of change, says Friedman is not so much about sentence structure, style and syntax as it is about the passion that is heard in the message. “People can only hear [us] when they are moving toward [us], and they are not likely to when [our] words are pursuing them. Even the choicest words lose their power when they are used to overpower. Attitudes are the real figures of speech.”

This week we continue with The Big Read, and we’re reminded that Luke’s writer presents for us a Jesus who’s passionately faithful to an attitude of change. We’ve read through the first 7 chapters of Luke and learned of an ordered pattern in Jesus’ story; a pattern of teaching, healing and inviting us to follow. So, today, we pick up in chapter 8 with the same pattern: teaching, healing, calling. Jesus opens chapter 8 with a particular figure of speech that motivates change. He teaches through parables.

The word parable comes from the Greek, para – bole, two words, para which means beside and the verb bole which means to throw, or put or place. Typical of Luke, Jesus teaches parables in the context of every day life: farming scenes, shepherding, domesticity. In other words, Jesus takes our typical everyday life and puts beside it, throws alongside it something greater, more extraordinary, an abundant life: the kingdom of God, promised for us all.

Maybe we need to commission Jesus to do our marketing. Our world is crowded with messages and media and information. Our friend Nathan Dunghan, in his research, reminds us that we’re slammed with something like 5,000 hits of information every day. So, if we’re going to get a message, hear a story that becomes our story, at least two things must be in place. The messenger needs to want to be in relationship with us and we’d better be ready to listen. Jesus is the man.

Now, Jesus’ parabolic teaching is not heard by all listeners. It’s challenging and calls us to attention, to be motivated to change. Jesus is brilliant in his teaching with his choice of words. But, most of all, what draws us to Jesus is his deep desire to convey the depth of his love for us, to invite us into his relationship with God; a relationship that challenges, and changes and converts us to share in kingdom planting and kingdom harvesting. His passion is so great, Jesus will take whatever measures he needs to take to bring us to him.

Most often Jesus comes into our lives and walks along with us in what is most familiar. Throughout the first 7 chapters of Luke Jesus comes to our dinner table, worships with us, lays healing hands upon us, comes to our work places and our homes, our neighborhoods, asks us to follow him, then disrupts, challenges and confronts with his

teaching in parables. We're at risk in our every day life, he cautions, should we fail to listen for the kingdom of God.

Parables come in several shapes and sizes. Sometimes they're short, one line proverbs offering words of prophetic wisdom, like, "you are the light of the world." Sometimes they come in riddles (Judges 14:10-18). Sometimes parables come in similes, those stories where a comparison is made. Jesus says, the kingdom of God is like, a mustard seed; is like the leavened yeast; is like a treasure; is like a fine pearl. Or as in the case of today's story, parables can be told as allegories.

With an allegory, each item of the story is assigned a specific meaning, as Jesus explains in today's story of the parable of the sower, freeing the hearer to interpret the story according to their circumstances at the time.

Jesus has learned the ancient art of parabolic story telling growing up in the temple under the traditional teaching of wise rabbis. In Jesus' parabolic teaching he shatters and disrupts. He teases and cajoles. He knocks us off balance, rocks our world, opens us up to see and hear a very different world, and then, invites us into the dialogue awaiting our response.

He teaches in parables because he's passionate about breaking us into a new way of thinking, new insight that spurs new decisions; a different pathway, God's kingdom; a kingdom where he's counting on us to be about his work of harvesting kindness, forgiveness, love and mercy. God's kingdom, not just for Jesus' followers then, but a kingdom now and forever, promised to us through Jesus Christ.

So, he sets us on the path and says, "anyone who has ears for listening should listen". Let's listen to the parable of the sower, ...Jesus' story and our story as well...

Jesus is coming toward the conclusion of his Galilean ministry. It's not long before he resolutely turns toward Jerusalem where he conquers death upon the cross with his resurrection, promising for us the kingdom of God. What Luke finds important is who follows. Accompanying Jesus are the 12 and women, as well as among Jesus' closest companions.

Women are marginalized in Jesus' time, and especially these women as at least Mary Magdalene has been possessed by evil spirits. Interesting, though, these women appear to be with means and consequently, independent. They are the backers and practical foundation of Jesus' ministry providing for Jesus and the 12 from their own resources! A remarkable turn about in a society where women have no voice, no apparent means of their own. Luke's writer has yet to tell us the purpose of Jesus' followers, to proclaim the good news and heal, but, clearly, having been welcomed by Jesus, hearing his message for change, they are eager to follow.

Jesus is moving from neighborhood to neighborhood in Galilee, and crowds are gathering. This savior takes time to sow the good news of God's kingdom everywhere.

He goes where he's invited and where he's not invited. He proclaims the kingdom with sinners, and tax collectors, women with bad names, at the home of Pharisees, on the Sabbath, in the Temple, the synagogue, on the mountain top and on the plain.

Knowing that everyone loves a good story, Jesus teaches in parables, every day, ordinary stories, not particularly religious stories; stories that get our hearts racing about the way things can be, the way things are with Jesus Christ rooted, planted deep within us.

Surrounded, Jesus tells them the story of a farmer who goes out to sow his seeds. He carelessly throws seeds every which way, here and there, on hard ground, on rocky soil, on the thorny path. Now, maybe it is that farmers in Jesus time farmed in reverse order. First they sowed, then they plowed the seed into the soil.

But, on second thought, seed is just too precious; much too valuable a commodity to be tossing it around. We know that seed was purchased in neighboring villages from money loaned by Palestinian backers. Yet, this farmer in Jesus' parable has no regard for costly expense of seed.

Soil does not yield good crop if the farmer doesn't know what he's doing, if the seed is bad or if the soil is poorly tended. The farmer, although extravagant in his method, is confident, knows what he's doing. Apparently, the seed is good seed, as it grows despite the quality of the soil. Jesus delivers the difficult message, the crop's failure must be in the soil.

Once in the soil, the seed is trampled on, snatched up by hungry birds, withers away, and is choked out. At last, some seed, falling on rich soil, produces a full crop. A sound, strong crop produced in Jesus' day typically yields 10 fold. But, this soil doesn't just creep out a meager yield. This crop is bountiful, Jesus teaches, yielding a miraculous one hundred fold.

Typical of Jesus' parabolic teaching, he engages his listeners in active dialogue, a back and forth of questions and answers, where listening leads to learning and motivation for change. Jesus leaves the door open and listeners become hearers as they ask, what does the parable mean?

This farmer isn't assessing the soil conditions or how best the soil will be cultivated, or even if the soil is at all ready to receive the precious seed. He's a farmer of great hope. He starts extravagantly tosses seed everywhere. First on pathways crowded with obligations and promises made that lead to hurried, busy lives, where little room is made for God's Word.

In an effort to honor yet another obligation, we take steps to listen, adding God's love and mercy to our list of things that need our response. But, it's just easier to travel the pathway of least resistance. We leave the seed exposed to those parts of us that turn us away from God and the seed is snatched up. God never gives up, though.

Then, something happens. Life gets messy and rocky. We need God once again. This time, we're all ears as God, shows up and once again promises love and mercy. We listen and we go along, excited to have these roots sown within us. We practice our study of scripture and say our prayers and turn in directions of kindness and gentleness. And, life seems to loosen its burdens. Then, comfortable, we let up on our practices. One day, something happens again. We need our faith. We search deep within us, but we failed to securely till the soil and the foundation is too weak to take the seed to root. We let God's grace shrink, and wither.

The cycle keeps happening, Jesus explains. He gives us another example. Now the seed is planted among the thorns, and grows, until our worries and greed simply prevent us from hearing, and God's Word is choked out.

It's a difficult teaching, being held accountable. But, Jesus' love for us is so great. He knows full well that we're the very soil eager to nurture and grow in God's Word.

It seems Jesus is addressing two groups of listeners: Those who take the time to be invested in an attitude of hearing God's Word, and growing to change; and those who simply go along, listening to the Word of God, but failing to truly hear.

In this chapter 8 of Luke alone, the word akouw which means, "to hear" is repeated 7 times. Jesus calls for us to have ears to hear.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy comes from God's message, delivered by Moses, to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. The people have trampled through the wilderness, thirsted for God's promise, and crowded out God's hope with whining and complaining. And yet, God hears their complaints and comes again sowing God's promise of hope, love and mercy. Moses begs for the people to hear God's Word and cries out to the people, Hear...Hear the Lord our God.

The word, "to hear" in Hebrew is much more than just listening. The word "hear" in Hebrew is Shema and it means to obey. Moses says, obey this commandment, people of God:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Hear these words. Plant them on your heart. Root them within your soul. Fix them as your mark.

The message of the parable is only complete when it receives a response; where with patient endurance, and generous hearts, those who hear are free to bear abundant fruit in the name of Jesus Christ.

So, Jesus continues his teaching with the parable of the lamp and more demands on listening. He goes on to heal a man possessed by demons; he raises Jairus' daughter from the dead, and heals a woman who suffers from hemorrhages, all people who choose

turn toward the Word, endure and persevere, in obedience, allowing God's grace to be planted deep within them, well rooted for practicing their faith.

Jesus teaches, those who have ears to listen will hear. In the ordinary, Jesus teaches the extraordinary, the exceptional. Maybe it is that we re-title the story, not the Parable of the Sower, but the Parable of the Soil.

This week, as we go about in our listening, may we rejoice and celebrate that Jesus glorifies in us and finds within us soil rich with an attitude of hearing the Kingdom of God, and may our hearing be active obedience to his Word. Amen.