

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 8:1-21 "Consider How You Listen"

Jesus is on the move. In this "travel" section of Luke's narrative, he goes beyond the area around Lake Galilee, and is greeted by large crowds from every town. His journeys will take him south and east, into the area beyond Jordan, into Judea, and eventually of course to Jerusalem. Probably 20 or more people are with him - even more joining them later after the feeding of the 5000 - but at this stage his company includes the Twelve and a group of women.

Unusually in 1st century writings, several of the women are named - Mary from Magdala, Joanna, Susanna - and it's said that they support the company by their service and their own funds. These are not "wealthy patrons" in the Greco-Roman style, but women who have experienced healing from Jesus, have been welcomed into his community, and are now showing their gratitude and devotion to him - echoes of the forgiven woman in the previous passage who poured perfume on his feet. It's one of many signs (which Luke likes to emphasize) of how Jesus treated women in ways quite unknown in 1st century Jewish or Greco-Roman culture - not without scandalizing many pious Jews.

1) *The Sower and The Soils*

The large crowds who come to be healed or to listen to Jesus present a paradox - among them there are still only a few people who

have truly become disciples of Jesus, who have "believed" in him. Why is that? Jesus confronts the issue of his proclaiming "the kingdom of God," and people's response to him, in the famous parable of *The Sower*.

Today we all know the story: seed is scattered widely, but only some of it grows to maturity and produces a crop - although a good one. Those who heard the story first, wondered what it meant. So Jesus takes a moment to answer the Twelve's puzzlement - why is he telling stories like this? - and explains the way parables "work." They are short stories, sometimes allegorical, that demand something of the hearer: an act of imagination, discernment, even faith, to grasp their point. They may have one "punch line" that you have to be alert to grasp. And all of this, Jesus explains, is deliberate - the truth is only for those "*who have ears to hear.*" But many people "never get the point;" to them, these are just stories. And that is how Jesus' kingdom arrives, subtly, for those who are *listening*. But for many people, "*though hearing, they do not understand.*"

So Jesus explains *The Sower* to the Twelve. He is sowing "*the word of God.*" It does not enter the hearts of some hearers, and is lost as quickly as birds devour seed on hard ground. Some people hear and appreciate Jesus' invitation to join his kingdom, but when troubles come, it becomes clear that

they have very shallow faith and soon fall away. Some people start to grow in faith, but are distracted and finally choked by other cares and concerns, and they never mature. A few people show by the fruit of their lives that the word has entered deeply into them. Jesus' implicit question is "*what kind of soil are you?*"

The difference in response Jesus puts down to "how people hear." He reinforces this with comments about hidden lamps, and hidden things being revealed: saying that over time it becomes plain who has listened deeply and who has not. So his "punch line" is "*Consider carefully how you listen!*" You may think you have heard, but will find you have not listened; "*what you think you have*" you may in fact not have, and you will lose it. There are many hindrances to discipleship - even mothers and brothers (whom Mark says had come "*to take charge of him because he was out of his mind*") - and they have to become lower priorities if you are going to listen carefully to the Word of God and then be able to "*put the word into practice*" - to act in a manner that shows you are part of his kingdom.

2) *Are We Listening?*

A very familiar story, isn't it? How does it speak to us? Do we in fact "hear" what Jesus says to us?

About 10 years ago, my wife would at times say to me "You're not listening to me;" and I would respond "It's not that I'm not listening, I can't hear you." She reasonably replied "So why don't you get a hearing aid?" I did, and that helped a lot! But of course she was also saying, as so many wives do to their husbands, "You are not listening to *how I say* what I say, so you are missing the point of what I say!" There is a way of hearing that truly is listening, and a way that barely hears the words.

So it is when we hear "the word of God." That goes far beyond hearing sermons, of course; in our culture we have multiple opportunities and multiple media through which we can "hear the word." - the word might come through reading, on the radio, from someone we know- even our spouses! But the story of The Sower still applies. Some of us are too hard-hearted to hear anything, or at least anything more. We are like compacted earth, a heavily trodden foot path, and nothing gets in any more. We have "heard it all before." We have "tried it and it didn't work." We think "Jesus" is for women and children and wimps.

There are those who sleep through sermons, those who are busy planning their afternoons, those who are worrying about their children. There are those who, out of politeness, pretend to be listening, but who don't hear a word! There are those who are bored, those who are disdainful. Some people hear nothing because they are "not listening."

Then there are those of us who have heard the word at some time, it seemed to take root, but a crisis made it wither. A spouse died, a child or sibling died, we were betrayed, we lost our careers or our reputation or our health; and we cut ourselves off from God, from his people, from his church. When crises come, we hide away, we jump ship. We become angry with God, or with other Christians, or we live in denial. "I can't go to church any more, it reminds me too much of when I was there with my husband." Sad, tragic, a sign that grief and mourning have gone on way too long, and have turned inward in an attempt to shut out pain. Just when we need God most, we shut him out of our lives, we leave the church, we abandon the life of faith, we lose Christian friends who have known and loved us so long. Not the way Christians are supposed to deal with crisis!

I need hardly belabor the fact that some of us never mature as Christians because we get distracted by other things. Some are good, some are not; too many become obsessions. Anxiety is a sure killer of faith and joy and hope. There has to be a boundary between reasonable, responsible concern and all-consuming anxiety. And in this culture, I fear we are all in danger of losing sight of that boundary. Whether it's our schedules, our health, our children, our finances, we spend far too much time worrying about things that we have little control over – which is, of course, the root problem: we want to control things, and get very anxious when we realize we won't be able to.

Pursuits of wealth and of pleasure are just two more ways we seek control over our feelings. We want to feel good; we don't want to feel bad; maybe more money and more enjoyment will make us feel more alive! Faith is quickly choked by pursuits like that. One of the sad facts of middle-class suburban life today is that too many of us are unhappy in the midst of so much plenty and opportunity, and few of us grow into anything you could reasonably call spiritual maturity. Even family can be a hindrance to faith, if it's all about maximizing our children's activities until even they are exhausted, or having to see our parents or visit our grandchildren every weekend – and having no time or energy or money or inclination to devote to spiritual growth. And to some degree, every one of us – including the Pastor – is guilty of allowing many good and bad things smother our growth in faith.

“Consider your listening,” says Jesus. *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”* Hearing requires attention, concentration, a determination to know what the person speaking wants to communicate to us. Husbands who never listen to their wives eventually discover their wives have gone silent. Children who will

not listen to their parents finally discover that their parents have nothing more to say to them. People who are too preoccupied with themselves to listen to God may find he has gone silent, leaving them to themselves.

As we age, it's been said that we “become more like ourselves.” The restraints that we put on for the sake of society and work and family fall away, and we can't bother to pretend any more. For some people, the smile comes off and the frown appears. For others, the driven-life mercifully fades, and a mature and peaceful person emerges. It is all revealed in the end, and there is more that a hint in Scripture that we shall live for a long time with what we have become.

So listen, while you can still hear; take the Word in, chew it slowly, digest it, let it go down deep and shape you. “Consider carefully how you listen... and don't let yourself be distracted or choked so that you fail to grow.” Let us not wake up one day to discover that the faith we thought we had was in fact fake; that the words had never gone deep, that we had been simply going through the motions, that all that was said to us had gone in one ear and out the other, because we were so engrossed with other things.

“He, or she, who has ears to hear; let them hear!”

Let us pray...