

Homily for Pentecost 6, 2020

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

'Listening ears'

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

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INTRODUCTION

As you all know,
in the early part this year churches around the world suspended their public worship services due to COVID-19.

As this happened,
Something else quite incredible happened all around the world fairly rapidly.

Thousands and thousands of churches moved their worship and preaching and Bible studies and other activities on to the internet,

From city cathedrals to tiny little country congregations,
This was this dramatic increase of Christian churches taking up opportunities to proclaim the Christian message using new media.

Now,
As this happened,
Many of these churches discovered something surprising.

They discovered that sometimes online,
they were reaching more people on a given Sunday than they normally would.

So in the words and imagery of Jesus' parable today,
These past months have unexpectedly given an incredible opportunity to sow the seed of God's powerful word.

So then, with all that...

Surely it means that we can automatically expect a great Christian revival in our land and around the world,
That as Churches slowly return to public worship services they'll be filled to overflowing,

Because surely it's a simple equation:
Sow lots of seed,
Get lots of grain,

Spread lots of God's Word,
Get lots of spiritual fruit?

Well, Jesus teaches us today that it's not quite so simple as that.

Indeed we can and should pray for spiritual renewal and awakening,
Coming out of this time I hope people will be lead to repentance,
faith in Jesus Christ,
and life in his church.

But it seems to me Jesus wants to give us today a sober mind about this,

Because it's one thing to sow the word,
It's another thing for that word to take root, grow and bear fruit.

And as we think through these four types of soil Jesus pictures for us,
I find it more helpful to meditate on these,
not so much as four types of people,

But as four different conditions of the heart,
Four different attitudes or responses to the word.

Today we'll call them,

The hard heart,
The shallow heart,
The strangled heart,
And the open heart.

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HARD HEART -

The first problem is the *hard* heart.

This Jesus says you can picture as seed which falls on the path rather than proper soil,
so that birds come and eat it up.

Jesus says this is when a person hears but does not understand,
And understand not just mentally,
But doesn't receive, accept the word.

And in fact Jesus says the devil comes and snatches away what is sown.

I think I've shared with you before how I remember growing up hearing my dad say:
'The devil works hardest on Sundays'.

The context wasn't so much some profound teaching moment about spiritual reality,
But rather a lament as my brothers and I would fight and argue on the way home from church,
Sometimes even in the carpark before we got to the car perhaps.

But according to Jesus' teaching there is something profoundly true about that throw-away statement,
The devil works hardest on Sundays.

According to the Scriptures I think we could say that the devil isn't hardest at work in the red-light district, so to speak,

But in the Church district,
If I can put it that way.

The devil, Jesus says,
Is hard at work when the Word is being sown,
And that is a sobering reality isn't it?

One that surely awakens in us spiritual vigilance for ourselves and all who hear the Word.

Now you ask,
How does he do that?

Well Jesus doesn't say here.

But the picture of the seed on the path and the birds coming suggests something like a moment where a person just begins to grasp something of the Christian message,

And no sooner has that flicker happened than something else races in and removes it.

Perhaps just a thought.

So you know how it goes.

You hear a pastor or another person speaking the word of God,

And perhaps you just begin to grasp the wonder of grace,
Or the mystery of angels,
Or the seriousness of eternal death,

Whatever it is,

But no sooner has that seed of God's word landed on your heart than a thought comes racing in to your head,

Oh that energetic young pastor,
He means well but he's probably exaggerating a bit.

Oh that wise older pastors,
He's clever but modern people can't really go along with that anymore can they?

Then perhaps other things occur to you,

That person speaks of God's kingdom in a way that's attractive and engaging and
I should find out more,
But....

They probably don't really even believe it themselves,
They might only be in it for the money and lifestyle,
They're probably practice what they preach either.

I'm taking a little bit of rhetorical license here,
But I don't think it's too much of a stretch to recognize those thoughts as an
example of the devil coming and snatching that word away.

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SHALLOW HEART –

The next one though,
Is the shallow heart.

This is the rocky ground in Jesus' picture,
Where the seed doesn't take proper root and so when it grows quickly and the
hot sun comes out it is scorched and withers.

Jesus says it's like this when a person received the word with joy,
But doesn't endure and falls away when trouble or persecution comes.

Now how do we think about this one.

If in the first soil we spoke about thoughts that come in and displace the planted
seed of God's word,

Perhaps in this one we could see something more to do with the emotions.

Notice this receiving with joy.

This could be the situation where a person has an important spiritual experience at a Christian camp or rally or wherever,

And this experience fires them up,
It's like a spiritual growth spurt,
And there's a passion there.

Lots of people have reactions to the Word of God like this when it's connected with music,
Intense emotional reactions to sacred music as the word is proclaimed in that way.

Now we don't want to dismiss those experiences,
there are plenty of people who have them and they are the beginning or ongoing significant steps in a life-long journey of faith,

But interestingly,
Jesus does seem to offer a word of caution about that sort of reception of the word,
If that's all it is.

That it is in danger of not having deep enough roots,
And so withering at the first sign of trouble.
The word used translated here as fall away is actually something more like scandalized,
Or we might say 'offended'.

So it's not just that there is some trouble generally,

But it's trouble that a person of faith encounters,
And it makes them think,
'Hang on, I don't deserve this,
I've use committed my life to God and now this is happening...'

The shallow heart.

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STRANGLED HEART -

Next is the strangled heart.

This is the seed which falls among thorns,
And the thorns grow up around the seed and choke it, or strangle it.

This is the one who hears the word,
But the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word

Now I think most of us can resonate and see clearly how the lure of wealth,
The excessive love of money,
can choke the spiritual life out of us and others.

But what about the cares of the world?
What's that about?

What's interesting about that one is that it seems to be a more neutral or even
positive thing.

Real cares,
Real concerns,
Real issues.

And the phrase translated cares of the world could be more like the particular
cares and concerns of a given period,

One translation says 'the worry of the times'.

COVID 1 has brought particular cares and concerns hasn't it?

I don't need to list them all,

We're all aware and there are different ones that are predominate for different people.

And here's the thing,
Most if not all of them are legitimate cases and concerns in one way or another.

But if they take all our energy and attention,
If they become the all-pervasive lens through which we look at life,

They too will be like thorns growing up around our faith,
And will threaten to strangle it.

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OPEN HEARTS

Then there's the good soil.

This is the one who hears the word and understands it,
Take it in,
Receives it deeply and holds fast to it,

In this case not only is there real growth and a real yield,

But an abundant one,

In one case a hundredfold,
In another sixty, and in another thirty.

It really is amazing to think about the power of a seed.

We get used to this,

But try to think back to when you were a little child,
And you first saw a seed germinate,

When you first saw that little sprout on top of the dirt,

When you first harvested a vegetable or picked a flower from a seed that you had sown in the ground,

We lose the wonder of just how wonderful this is!

I still get a little bit of that child-like wonder every time I see something sprout into life from that little seed that goes under the ground,
Perhaps that's just because I'm not a great Gardner.

And this, Jesus says,
Is how the kingdom of heaven works.

It's a different sort of kingdom,
You come into it through listening to a message,
Faith comes by hearing,

And spiritual fruit in this kingdom happens as that word takes deep root and grows,
Sometimes slowly,

But make no mistake,
There is real power there,
And an abundant harvest.

When I hear Jesus teach about this various figures from Church history come to mind,
And for today I want to mention briefly just one whose had a bit of an impact on me,
The famous Baptist preacher named Charles Spurgeon.

The story goes that there was a particular point in his teen years when the seed of God's word took deep root in his life.

There was on the way to a scheduled appointment a snowstorm diverted him into a primitive Methodist chapel for shelter,
Where an unknown, substitute lay-preacher was delivering the sermon.

And Spurgeon later recounts how the preacher really didn't have much to say,
But just kept coming back to his text over and over again.

Charles Spurgeon credited that service, that sermon, that day as being the one
when he came to saving faith in Jesus Christ,
And was set on the path then to being a Christian preacher himself.

By the time of his death in 1892,
Spurgeon himself had preached nearly 3,600 sermons,
and published 49 volumes of commentaries, sayings, anecdotes, illustrations and
devotions,

many of which are still read today over a hundred years later.

You don't know it,
But you occasionally get a few Spurgeon-inspired lines or even outlines from this
pulpit.

What's my point in telling you this story?

That from that one little seed of God's word,
When it landed in that good soil,

Yielded abundantly.
Now of course it's usually not that dramatic,
Sometimes hundredfold,
Sometimes sixty,
Sometimes thirty, Jesus says.

But his Word is powerful and effective,
And it will accomplish that for which he purposes.

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LAW/GOSPEL

So,
The hard heart,
The shallow heart,
The strangled heart,
And the open heart,

Which is the soil of your heart today?

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that it's all those unbelievers and lapsed Christians in the first three categories and we're all the good soil here,

Each of you lets the devil in to snatch away the word from our hearts,

Each of you respond sometimes with joy but don't let the word take deep root,

Each of you let the cares of this world and the lure of wealth choke that spiritual life out of you.

It's worth knowing, by the way,

That one of the next times we hear that word Jesus yses here about 'falling away',

Is jut before Jesus goes to his death,

When he tells his disciples,
All of you this night, will fall away,

Bear this in mind,
None of those fledgling spiritual seedlings could handle the heat that night.

Left in your own,
There is no good soil in you,

and your Lord calls you to repent.

But thanks be to God,
Thought they all fell away,

Jesus still went to the cross.

He let the thorns that would choke our faith,
pierce his brow,

And he let the rocks that would prevent our growth,
became for him a tomb.

But he rose again,
He sent his Spirit and he with us now,

So that in his goodness and grace he keeps on sowing the seed,
The word of the kingdom,

The good news that because of his death and resurrection,
There is forgiveness, life and salvation for all who believe.

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CONCLUSION

So whether we're in the middle of a once-in-a-generation pandemic,
Or not,

Whether we're joining in worship online or in the flesh,

Let's keep sowing the seed of God's powerful word,

Let's keep listening to and receiving that word ourselves,

Let's be sober-minded about the different conditions of the heart that word
finds,

And let's be thrilled with the promise of abundant spiritual fruit.

God grant it for Jesus' sake, Amen.