

Sermon: **Listen!**
Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Jesus began the telling of this parable saying, "Listen!" He concluded it saying, "Let everyone with ears listen!"

Listen! I found myself using that word quite a lot over the Fourth of July week-end when my 18 month grandson was with us. The boy has ears... two of them... one on the east and one on the west, and they work well, I'm sure of it. Every time the clock in the living room chimed he'd totter into the living room and point saying "clock". A few minutes later when the cuckoo clock in the study sounded he'd totter into the study and say "bird." When he heard the siren on the toy fire truck he'd light up and say "broooooom". Besides recognizing sounds, he is beginning to understand words. When I'd say "outside" or "go for a ride", he responded with full-bodied readiness.

But when I said "No no, Michael, let's not touch the buttons on the stereo", the response was different. There was a disconnect somewhere between hearing and listening. He has ears to hear and they work, but he's not listening. He's not taking it to heart. There's no effect on his behavior.

It can be a bit demeaning when a chime in another room, or a little wooden bird saying "cuckoo, cuckoo", or a toy siren gets a happy positive response, and the injunctions of his loving grandfather gets nothing.

It's not getting through to him. Why not?!? Can you understand this? If you can, you should be able to understand this parable of Jesus.

"All right middle school campers, gather round and listen up. Tomorrow we're going on a hike, so listen carefully. (Harold, you're not listening. This is important.)

This will be an over-night hike so you'll need to bring your sleeping bag and also a flashlight.

There will be a lake there and we'll all go swimming so bring your swim suit. (Larry, did you hear what I just said?)

Now when we're hiking, it's very important that we all stay together on the trail. Don't be wondering off the path, OK? There's poison ivy. (Bobby, pay attention.) There could possibly be snakes."

Next day, three kids don't have flashlights. They say they forgot. Two kids didn't bring swim suits. They didn't know they'd need them. And one kid doesn't even have a sleeping bag. He didn't hear anything about that. And once the hike began, sure enough, Harold veered off the path chasing a chipmunk and, yes, got poison ivy.

How does this happen?!? They all have ears to hear. They were all present and accounted for when the instructions were given and repeated and explained. What happened? Do you know? If you do, you should know the meaning of this parable of Jesus.

Little boys; adolescent kids. Yes, this sort of thing happens all the time. Learning to listen is a big part of growing up. How many of us have grown up? Let's be honest with ourselves as adults. I'll go first.

Not long ago I telephoned a man to get some information I needed. The man I was calling was a professional in his field, and he gave me a very succinct and straight-forward answer to my question. But I wasn't really happy with what he had to say. So I began to qualify. "Yes, but under these circumstances wouldn't it be true that such and so, or at least this or maybe that?" "Not really", he replied, "the same would apply." "Yes, but I don't think that I could... ya' know... because this is a different process and... I mean... well... in order to do that... and, um." "Yes", he said, "I understand your predicament, but you will have to make some decisions and adjustments in all of this.

Now, he's the professional and I'm not. But I'm not completely ignorant about this and besides, the ramifications of all this will have a large effect on me, not him. So I kept trying to

redefine and re-route things till finally he interrupted me and said, "Excuse me, sir, you're not listening." That's what he said to me; "you're not listening!"

I didn't like that. I'm not a child, nor am I completely ignorant of the subject we were discussing. And he tells me I'm not listening! I didn't like that, and frankly, I didn't like him. The next time I saw him I sarcastically muttered under my breath, "You're not listening".

But the truth be told, I *wasn't* listening. I heard what he said, simple and plain, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear, so I tried to qualify it and interject what I thought might be mitigating circumstances, and I tried to validate my own insight and credibility. But I wasn't really listening. I was not embracing the importance or the relevance of what he was telling me.

I'm not a child. I'm an adult with an education and, I think, a fairly reasonable guy, but I was *not* listening.

Can you understand that? Can you identify with that? If you can, you should be able to understand and identify with this parable of Jesus.

This parable is not hard to hear. It tells easily. It pretty much preaches itself. But it's hard to, well, *hear*... to really hear. So Jesus began the parable saying, "listen! This is important. Let me call your attention to this so you will consider it and remember it and heed it." And he ended the parable saying, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

The word they are to hear, Matthew calls, "the word of the kingdom" The kingdom of God is a great theme throughout Matthew's gospel. If you read through his gospel you read how Jesus initially came preaching and teaching the kingdom of God as a way of living; a way of righteousness and justice that is revealed in Jesus Christ in his teaching, in his life and manner of ministry, and in his very character. He taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This kingdom way, as you hear it in Jesus' teaching and in his life, was so different than the ways of the earthly kingdoms of his day. It is absolutely counter-culture to our self-centered, commodity oriented, pleasure seeking society today. So it's hard to hear and receive.

Jesus taught the character of this kingdom in the Beatitudes of lowliness, meekness, mercy, purity of heart, hunger for righteousness, aptness for peacemaking, and patience in persecution.

He taught the behavior of this kingdom in what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

Citizens of this kingdom, he said, are salt to the earth. They have a positive effect on the world around them. They have a greater impact on the culture than the culture does on them. They are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

They not only refuse to murder, they refrain from anger.

They not only refuse adultery, they refrain from all that would incite improper lust.

They not only refuse to bear false witness, they are people of their word; people of integrity and truth; true from the inside out.

They are able to lovingly absorb wrong done to them without having to strike back in retaliation. They know that "a turned cheek is more powerful than a clenched fist".

They not only love their neighbors; they actually love their enemies and pray for their oppressors.

They give anonymously, not for attention or credit. They are motivated rather by their love of God and the needs of others.

They pray, not just when with others, but alone with God when only he sees and knows.

They have come to terms with the true meaning of stewardship, and no longer store and stockpile for themselves beyond their real need, but they give of themselves and their resources generously and willingly and lovingly.

And accordingly, they have learned not to worry so much about all this earthly stuff, even the "necessities" of life, and have learned to trust God who knows their needs.

They don't stand in judgment over each other. They are very conscious of their own sinfulness before God.

And then Jesus concluded this "sermon on the mount" saying: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them is like a wise person building his house on rock. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them is like a foolish person building his life on sand."

More dynamic than all his words was Jesus' life. Jesus *showed* us the kingdom of God in his own life. He was the embodied Word. He was the kingdom of God embodied in forgiveness; in reaching out to sick, poor, despised and disenfranchised; in humble loving service; in washing feet.

Jesus speaks of the "mysteries" of his kingdom. The ways of this kingdom are new and different and counter-cultural; so inside-out and upside-down and even shocking. It is no wonder that these "secrets" are hard to hear and to receive and to integrate into actual practice and behavior. We hear the word of the kingdom, but we don't really *hear* it.

After all the teaching and showing, Jesus now says, "Listen! Let anyone with ears listen! He begins his explanation of this parable, saying, "Hear then the parable of the sower.

When anyone hears (notice that they all hear) the word of the kingdom but does not understand it, it's like seed falling on the hard dirt path. It never sinks in. It is rejected outright. It never germinates.

When anyone hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, but it only seems to be a short-lived cathartic kind of thing, it's like seed falling on rocky ground. It makes him happy and he feels good about himself. It answers many of his questions and seems to work well for him. But after a while when this new way of living doesn't fix everything and more trouble comes along and he gets kicked around, the initial joy is soon gone. It's not like the guy on TV promised or like the author of that book suggested. So the whole thing is a wash and he gives up on it all and it never takes deeper root. It was only a shallow, superficial surface emotion that really didn't last. So he's off to find some alternative, more workable spirituality.

When anyone hears the word but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, it's like seed sown among thorns. She absolutely agrees with it all and wants her life to be more like that, really. It's just that there are too many other things going on in her life right now. It's impractical and seemingly impossible these days for her to make this kingdom stuff *the* priority of her life. She'll do what she can. Maybe down the road apiece, after she's accomplished a few more of her life goals and is a little better established, she'll get back to it.

But then Jesus says, that when someone hears the word of the kingdom and understands it and receives it and takes it to heart and it roots and begins to grow in health and vitality and it begins to bear good fruit, it's like seed sown on good soil. It bears the fruit of the kingdom; the fruit of the Spirit; the fruit of righteousness; the fruit of Christ-likeness. The kingdom of God and all that Jesus taught and lived, is what this one's life is about. It's who he is. As Jesus said, he becomes known, by the fruit he bears. His life is productive in the kingdom of God. It becomes his essential nature.

The little grandson; the adolescent camper; the adult on the telephone. They all have ears to hear but they don't hear. They're not listening.

When the word of the kingdom is cast our way, as individuals and as a church community, do we hear it? Do we really *hear* all that Jesus taught; the character he revealed in his life; the ministry to which he calls us; the self-forgetting, self-giving manner in which it is to be done? How well do we hear it. How well do we receive it? How rooted is it in our motivation for ministry to each other and to our community?

The church is the embodiment of Christ; the embodiment of his kingdom; of his love and forgiveness and his reconciling grace. Our ministry to all those in need of his grace is the embodiment of Christ himself.

Listen! Let everyone of us listen. Let's listen together. All who have ears to hear listen; really listen! And may we hear the words of his kingdom and act upon them.

Amen.