

## **“Authentic Hearing”** Mark 4:1-20 (NRSV)

**It had been a long and emotional day for Jesus, and it wasn't over.** First, he couldn't finish his breakfast because the eager ones who wanted to see him and hear him were crowded into the house where he was staying (3:20). Then he found out his own family was trying to get in on the action as they passed on a message from person to person, while they were standing outside the house, to those inside, indicating they wanted bring him back to Nazareth for his own safety (3:21). Then he was accused by the scribes of being in league with the devil, to which he issued a stern warning about persistent resistance against the Holy Spirit (3:22-30). Lastly, he'd proclaimed the shocking idea that his true mother and brothers and sisters were not his earthly relations, but “whoever does the will of God” (3:31-35).

**Now in the afternoon of the “same day,”** according to Matthew's Gospel (13:1), **Jesus left the house in Capernaum and went down to the refreshing shoreline of the Sea of Galilee to continue his preaching and teaching** (4:1). Indeed, the crowd was so large he had to get into a boat and, sitting in it, in true rabbinical fashion, he taught the people gathered along the shore at the water's edge. And we are told that **his teaching about “many things” included his remarkable, powerful illustrations called “parables”**(4:2).

**As Jesus surveyed the sunlit multitude by the seashore, he was aware of the range of their response to his message.** He was aware that the mystery of the kingdom was being worked out in their lives. He knew that some were getting what he was saying -- they were coming to a deep and abiding faith -- and others, even though they might've understood what he was saying, were hardening in unbelief. Naturally, Jesus wanted all of them to listen with receptive hearts. So **he gave them a marvelous, memorable parable about a farmer sowing his seed.** The parable drew on a rich agricultural image with which most of them would've been familiar: a man with a seed bag tied to his waist, walking over the freshly tilled furrows of his field, rhythmically casting his seed far and wide.

**I wonder where Jesus got that insight into the process of planting, growing and harvesting?** Did his father or mother teach him to pay attention to gardening? Did he have more of a green thumb than a carpenter's hand? Did he have to look after the family's fields as a boy? (I

know what that would've felt like as I've been on my knees in the dirt, weeding a garden, ever since I was seven or eight years old.) It's clear from what Jesus said that he understood the part that God, the gardener, and various kinds of soils, or hearts of people, play in the growth process.

Jesus gives his audience an explanation of the parable. **The seed is a proper and powerful symbol of the Word of God** that springs into life "all by itself" as it finds nourishment in good soil, and when it is warmed by the sun and watered by the rain. **The one who sows the seed is, of course, Christ and anyone else who puts forth God's Word**, whether in teaching or preaching, or in some personal one-to-one exchange of the gospel. **And the varieties of soil represent the varying conditions of human hearts into which the seed finds its resting place.** As the sower throws his seed, **some falls on a pathway or a roadside and the Adversary, or his helpers, steal it away.** The sower throws again and it lands on **rocky soil, where it quickly sprouts, only to wilt, without much of a root**, under the hot Palestinian sun. The sower casts his seed in another direction, and **it falls among thorns, where it is choked and cannot grow.** Finally, **other seed cast upon good ground, multiplies marvelously:** thirty, sixty, and a hundred times (4:14-20). That's the end of the parable!

Then Jesus said, **"Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"** (4:9). Jesus longed for people to catch the drift of what he was saying. Not everyone had "ears to hear" that day. Some understood, but many were perplexed. Even some of his followers were in the dark. We are told, "When he was alone [with them], those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables" (4:10). Jesus responded with another one of his "hard [or difficult] sayings" (quoting the prophet Isaiah):

"To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that  
     'they may indeed look, but not perceive,  
     and may indeed listen, but not understand;  
     so that they may not turn again and be forgiven'" (4:11-12).

In essence, **Jesus was saying that the condition of one's heart determines a person's receptivity to the truth.** The parables are full of truth, but for truth-rejecting people, they are inscrutable. **Either you will get it or you don't, or you won't.**

**This principle is paralleled in other areas of our life.** Physically, if we fail to exercise a particular muscle, we'll one day lose its use. It is the same with our intellectual powers. If we fail to use them, there will come a time when we will not be able to summon their full power. A local society called "Learning Plus" tries to help us stave off this eventuality. So God presents us with his truth, but if we do not respond positively to it, we'll lose it.

Alone with his followers, having made this sobering pronouncement, Jesus graciously explained the parable so that they wouldn't miss its meaning. He wanted them to become better listeners to the truth of the gospel. What he said may open our ears and hearts as well.

### **1. Seed cast on a path or road or hard hearts (Mark 4:15).**

The farmers' fields in ancient Palestine were long, narrow, often serpentine strips of land divided by little pathways which became beaten as hard as pavement by the feet, hooves and wheels of those who used them (Barclay, p. 92). **The seeds merely bounced off these hard surfaces, or were swept away by the wind.** The birds would find these seeds to be easy food.

**These beaten paths represent the hardened hearts and lives** of some relatively unsophisticated people **who listen to God's Word once in a while.** But their **busy comings and goings, and the frenetic traffic of life** have so hardened them that nothing of God's truth manages to stay very long with them. To these, life may be no more than the sports page and a beer, or a movie magazine and an hour at the beauty shop. The occasional funeral service catches their attention briefly, but for the most part there are better things to do. There may be no gross sin, but there is little or no interest in God as a long-term kind of thing. **Life is crowded with other things.**

On the other hand such people may be more sophisticated. **C. S. Lewis' Screwtape** describes one of his charges' experiences. The man is in the British Museum. He is reading and his reading suggests a train of thought that sets him on a path of spiritual inquiry. But **Screwtape**, devil that he is, intervenes by making the man terribly hungry for lunch.

Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps, I had got into him the unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a

man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of "real life" [by which he meant the newsboy and the bus] was enough to show him "that sort of thing" just couldn't be true.

(The Screwtape Letters, 1942, p. 12-14)

Such people's lives are easily **hardened with presuppositions, distortions or prejudices** that steel them to the truth. **They may be hostile, but very often they are simply uninterested.** God's truth has no relevance to them.

**Perhaps the main emphasis of Jesus' metaphor is busyness.** These people **beat the ground of their own lives asphalt-hard with their frenetic feet.** This was and is a warning to **people always "on the go"** who have no time for contemplation, who rarely give a second thought to the spiritual side of life. What a powerful warning to those of us who live in the ever-increasing pace of the twenty-first century!

**As the truth bounces off the surface of some overly busy lives,** our Adversaries come with a fluttering, chirping interest, some busy excitement, maybe some tasty tidbit of gossip, and fly away with the life-giving seed. **This ground needs to be broken up.** Often the plowing that is needed may bring some pain or stress or trial to soften up the hardened surface of our hearts to the powerful penetration of God's gracious love. What we need, above all, is the penetrating warmth of God's sun and the driving, soaking wetness of his spiritual rain. This is how God's grace came into our lives, isn't it? Life's hardships made us ever more ready to receive the goodness of his grace. Difficulties can make us quit our busyness, and then the Word of God can fall powerfully into the plowed ground of our hearts and lives.

## **2. Seed cast on rocky places or shallow hearts (Mark 4:16-17).**

**In Palestine much of the land is a two or three inch veneer of soil over limestone bedrock.** Here, when some of the seed falls, especially in **rocky places**, the warm sun quickly heats the seed up in the shallow soil, and the seeds sprout in feverish growth. But then the sun continues to beat down, the young plants meet **the stone beneath**, and they wither and die.

**This condition of seeds and soil can be likened to young, half-hearted Christians who never grow up beyond a simple Sunday-school faith.** The problem is that they often have a shallow, merely emotional response to Christ. Somehow the Word of God has never penetrated such people's

intellects and wills. These are ripe for picking by non-Christian sects. I must say I will always be grateful for having received university-sized answers to my university-sized questions when I began my university education. It pushed me “further up and further in” in my walk with Christ. And, since then, I haven’t stopped growing. There are still more questions to consider.

**Helmut Thielicke**, a theologian who lived to survive the horrors of the war to preach to 3,000 at St. Michael’s Church in Hamburg, Germany aptly said,

There is nothing more cheering than transformed Christian people and there is nothing more discouraging than people who have been merely “brushed” by Christianity, people who have been sown with a thousand seeds but in whose lives there is no depth and no roots. Therefore, they fall when the first whirlwind comes along. It is the half-Christians who always flop in the face of the first catastrophe that happens, because their dry intellectuality and their superficial emotionalism do not stand the test. So even that which they think they have is taken away from them (*The Waiting Father*, 1975, p. 57).

Certainly authentic faith involves great emotion. If there is no emotion, faith is crippled or even bogus. But **true faith must also be a matter of the mind and will**. True faith involves **all of the person**, who can then weather all kinds of tough times and situations.

### **3. Seed cast upon thorny soil or divided hearts (Mark 4:18-19).**

Next Jesus explained the image of **the sower casting his seed among the thorns**. Perhaps the thorn bushes aren’t visible because they have been burned off the surface of the ground, but their roots are still intact. When seed is sown on this kind of soil, and it is watered and successfully germinated, the entrenched thorns also sprout and grow with such a virulent violence that they choke out the struggling young wheat or oat grasses before they are able to produce any fruit.

**The thorns, Jesus explained, represent “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” (4:19a).** This portrays a **divided heart, a heart divided by competing, irreconcilable loyalties**. This heart makes some gestures towards Christ, but **“the cares of the world,”** i.e., “the distractions of this age,” pull it back. This heart is pulled in all kinds of other directions, leaving no room for spiritual concerns.

The “**lure of wealth,**” keeping up with the Joneses, draws this divided heart with the promise of great good. And “**the desire for other things**” involves buying things one does not need to impress people one doesn’t much care for with money one doesn’t have!

**This is what a divided heart looks like: a young man once proposed to a lovely young woman.** He said, “Darling I want you to know that I love you much more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I’m not rich. I don’t have a Rolls Royce, or a yacht, like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart.” She thought for a moment and then replied, “I love you with all my heart too; but, tell me more about Johnny Brown!” (Walter Underwood, The Contemporary 12, Nashville: 1984, p. 86).

**A heart that is concerned with many other things will find it difficult to be a fruitful.** Whatever you want to do, focus on it; commit yourself to it. Jesus also said, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and [Mammon]” (Mt. 6:24). So, too, **Kierkegaard** said, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” Many begin well; it looks like they will become excellent Christians, but, sadly, the love of other things eventually strangles all vestiges of Christianity from their lives.

#### **4. Seed in good soil or fruitful hearts (Mark 4:20).**

Finally, there is **the good soil in which the seed brings forth fruit.** The seed doesn’t bounce off the surface of this heart. It doesn’t momentarily flourish only to shrivel under adversity. It isn’t divided by competing desires and strangled. **It is a heart that allows God’s Word to take deep root.** It **produces a harvest of character:** “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23a). **It also produces “good works”** (Eph. 2:10).

**The hearing and reception and application of God’s Word is a mystery, but in this great parable Jesus gives us some insight into what is going on in the world.** He conveys to us how the kingdom of God is secretly at work in the kingdom of this world. Jesus conveys to those of us who will listen to him and hear him that God wants to love us into life, real life. **He wants us to flower and to flourish and to produce fruit.**

Right now the important thing is to **listen to him and to receive his Word with a receptive heart, not a hard heart** – that is a busy heart, impenetrable, **not a shallow heart** where only the emotions are involved, **not a divided heart** occupied with many other interesting, but essentially distracting things. Do you hear him?

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg  
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC  
March 6, 2011