

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Elizabeth H. Doolin  
Sunday, July 3, 2022

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Mathew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And

he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. If you have

ears, hear!"

"Hear, then, the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

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Friends, this is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

As I approached this text this week, thinking about our series exploring being the body, and what it means to be the ears of Christ, I was struck with how much information I have been hearing and receiving over the past few weeks. The news and messages that have filled my ears, and how they impact me. My morning routine typically goes like this - I try to wake up early, before my son, Ardy, so I can have some coffee and a little time to myself before the day gets going. After Ardy gets up in the morning I give him a bottle, and then hand him over to Tim so I can get ready for work. I then listen to NPR in my bathroom while washing my face, doing my hair and makeup, much like I remember my mom doing when I was little. My mom listened to NPR on the radio, while I use the app on my phone, so times are a little different, but it's funny how similar our morning routines turned out to be.

But over the past few weeks, almost everything that I hear hurts in some way. When I press play on my app, and I hear the accounts of the latest Supreme Court rulings and everything else going on in the world, I start to feel a bit sick in my stomach. While the decision on Roe v. Wade was devastating, it's not the only one. The impact of this summer's rulings on cases related to the separation of church and state, climate change, gun regulations, public schools - it all just feels like too much. I don't want to listen anymore. I don't want to know what's next. I'm afraid for the world that my son is going to grow up in, and I want the news to go away.

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---

In our Psalm today that you heard from earlier, the psalmist offers a plea to God to be heard. The psalmist asks for God to “Hear a just cause; attend to my cry, give ear to my prayer.” These words express a deep longing to be heard and known. We don’t know exactly what circumstances the psalmist faced that might have led to this prayer. But we can imagine that it was some kind of deep pain and suffering that led to the outcry expressed in this psalm. The same kind of outcry we hear from many today, expressing their disbelief, anger, and sorrow over many of the decisions that they have heard over the past few weeks. An outcry over injustice that impacts people individually and the nation’s body as a whole.

Yet in the psalmist’s cry, there is still trust in God; “I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God.” There is both pleading and trust in God’s presence, and trust that God does indeed hear the cries of those in need.

And in the parable from Matthew, we are offered a reflection on hearing from another angle - not just that God hears us, but how we are to hear one another, and hear the word God. Unlike many parables, Jesus actually goes into an explanation of this one, telling his followers the reasons why the seed did not bear fruit from the ground in which they landed. Each of their failures ultimately boil down to hearing without taking the time to understand, or hearing with the clouded judgment of fear and greed. *“But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”* Biblical scholar Douglas Hare writes that, “Here, ‘understanding’ refers not to intellectual awareness but to a moral commitment involving one’s inmost self.”

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---

If we take seriously Dr. Hare's assertion, then hearing to understand is not just an act of comprehension, but an act of beholding. It is beholding one another as children of God. And therefore being the ears means we seek to hear one another as God hears us. It means we Behold one another in what Martin Buber describes as the "I-Thou" rather than "I-it". We behold one another as subjects with whom we are deeply connected, rather than objects at a distance.

As I look back at our parable, I am aware that the analogy to seeds is not a perfect one, because unlike the seeds that the sower scattered in many directions, we as people have agency. There are many circumstances in our lives that we have no control over, but we do get to choose how we engage with others. If we are present to pain and suffering, or if we are passive. If we behold one another as subjects, or objects. It is through this deep listening that we learn how it is that God is speaking to us this day.

As a millennial living in 2022, I think there is a certain amount of pressure to respond to everything in the moment. To make our voices heard as quickly as possible so people know where you stand. To say the right words that communicate your values. In many respects I think this can be important, and is something I often do as well.

But taking the time to listen and understand, to sit with the heaviness of what it is that we hear through the voice of another, or a story on the radio, may yield greater fruit. Doing that work of deep listening is hard. As I mentioned earlier, I often feel like I cannot hear anything more. I want to turn everything off and walk away and for everything to just be okay. And sometimes we need to do that for our own mental health. We need to take breaks, and make space for silence and stillness - which might offer its own form of listening. But we can't completely shut down, or refuse to hear the voices of those whom God would have us hear.

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Otherwise, we will live into the warning that Jesus offers us from the prophet Isaiah in verse 15 of the eighth chapter of Matthew, in between the verses you heard earlier, saying, *“You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.”*

It is easy for our hearts to grow dull, and our ears to become hard of hearing, without even realizing it. In a world with so much a stake, it can be easy to grow numb and despondent. To be resigned to the state of things.

Because listening takes time and effort. And while listening for the sake of responding is not listening to understand, that does not mean our understanding will not lead to a response. When we listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit, then that response can be one of God’s justice and grace.

Theologian Gary Peluso-Verdend writes of our text today that “understanding does not mean mere acknowledgement. Rather, understanding is insight tied to urgency to act. Understanding is life-attuning knowledge. It is understanding that enables discipleship to begin.” My only quibble with this quote is that I would say that understanding doesn’t just enable discipleship to begin, but is an act of discipleship itself. Beholding the pain and suffering of one another, and of the world around us, is a hard thing to do. Turning our ears away would be the

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easier option. But true listening takes courage, as we heard from Brene Brown in our preparation for worship. Listening to understand allows our hearts and minds to be forever reforming, learning and unlearning what we thought we knew. Thereby shaping our leadership, or recognizing when it is time for others to lead. Not every cause is ours to be the voice of, but most every cause requires that we do indeed listen to the voices of those whom it impacts the most.

I think it is no coincidence that at the end of chapter 13, after Jesus preaches this parable and others illuminating what the kingdom of God is to look like, that he is rejected by the people of his home town. They could not do as he instructed, “if you have ears, hear.” They heard the message of the kingdom of God, and how we are to treat one another, but did not hear it with understanding, rejecting its message. When we fail to listen to the voices of those crying out today, that too is a rejection of Christ and his gospel.

As we approach the 4th of July, and the celebration of our country’s founding, I am aware of the range of emotions that many have as we enter into this holiday. Whether you are entering into this holiday in a spirit of joy, or a spirit of despair, know that there is power in the deep listening that God calls us toward. Know that there is power in the act of hearing, and being heard. Frederich Buechner writes that “true patriots are no longer champions of democracy, communism, or anything like that, but champions of the Human Race...There is only one Sovereignty that matters ultimately, and is of another sort altogether.”

Friends, we worship a sovereign God who hears us with deep understanding. Who listens to our cries, and models how we are to listen to one another. With an understanding that goes beyond a quick band aid response, but calls us into the hard work of being in community with

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one another. We are to be the ears of Christ in the world, listening to one another as God's beloved children. May it be so. Amen.