

St. James Lutheran Church

July 10/13, 2008

Pentecost IX

First Reading: Isaiah 55:10-13

Second Reading: Romans 8:1-11

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Listening to God
By Richard Holmer

Listen.

The first and last word Jesus speaks as he tells the parable of the sower is: LISTEN.

He begins: "Listen! A sower went out to sow . . ."

He concludes: "Let anyone with ears listen!"

If you've got ears, use 'em! God gave you one mouth and two ears, so you should listen twice as much as you speak. Listening means paying attention, taking what you hear to heart. Jesus brings good news. The gospel is a message – a message that needs to be heard, to be received. St. Paul said, "Faith comes through hearing."

This is why we continue to take the time to read the scriptures aloud – they are meant to be heard. It's why preaching has been central to Christian worship for 2,000 years: preaching is an auditory event. Reading a sermon is not the same as hearing it.

How else do we know about the grace of God except by hearing it? We come to know Jesus by listening to the words of Jesus – and listening to those who know Jesus speak about him. Jesus is God's life-giving Word to us. To take this word to heart is to be saved. Which is why the appropriate response to hearing the Word of the Lord is always, "Thanks be to God!"

Thanks be to God that we have a God who speaks to us, a God who addresses us in our deepest need and speaks to us in both truth and love.

Our God tells it like it is: the truth about us that is in many ways uncomfortable, and the truth about God that is our lasting comfort and joy.

The first and great commandment is to love the Lord our God. An essential way to do this is to pay attention, take the time, and listen. You and I know intuitively we are being loved when someone listens to us with undivided attention. It's the same with God. So it is our place, first of all, to listen to God.

This is the primary purpose of worship. Worship is our time to set aside all distractions and agendas and open our hearts to God. For worship to have any value, we must be good listeners.

- * The listening starts even before the service begins, as we enter the sacred silence of this space and remember God is here.
- * We listen for God in that moment of the confession set aside for reflection and self-examination.
- * We hear God speak words of assurance, announcing the entire forgiveness of all our sins.
- * Of course we listen for God in the readings from scripture (many times I hear something as the lesson is read aloud that I had not noticed in my silent reading.).
- * We listen to the sermon not only as the words of the preacher, but also as the Spirit-filled Word of God. And there is not one sermon preached, but as many sermons as there are listeners.
- * In speaking the ancient words of the Creed we hear again the essential truth about Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- * And then as we share the peace, we hear not just our friendly greetings – but the peace of God that passes understanding.
- * And here at the table we hear those most reassuring words: “This is my body, given for you,” “This is my blood, shed for you.” (if we're not listening, the we're just chewing.)

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Listening is a big part of what prayer is all about. Prayer isn't mainly meant to be our laundry list of needs, wants and concerns offered up to God. The fact is, God knows what we need better than we do.

Prayer is our time to listen to God. "Be still and know that I am God," the psalm says. Prayer is giving God time to make himself known to us – to be God for us.

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Listening is also a way to be in this world, listening attentively for a word from God that can be easily overlooked. We pay special attention to those whom Jesus told us to notice: the poor, hungry, homeless, sick, prisoners, strangers, the ones in need, the ones who are easy to ignore.

To listen is to love your neighbor.

Between his first and last word, instructing us to listen, Jesus describes the real impediments that exist to listening. He tells why it is that people fail to take the good news to heart. It does make you wonder why when God speaks, not everyone listens.

God's word is good seed, the highest quality – a seed that is scattered abundantly, you might even say recklessly. There is no shortage of seed – it gets spread all over the place.

- * In some cases it falls on hard ground, on hardened hearts – hearts made hard by circumstances or cynicism or despair or stubbornness or willfulness. The seed can't grow on hard ground. Is your heart ever hard like that?
- * In some cases the word is first welcomed with excitement and joy – but it is not embraced in a lasting way. The roots are shallow. The response is all on the surface. There's no abiding commitment. Is your spiritual attention span ever short like that?
- * Sometimes the good seed gets planted, but then it is choked and overshadowed by the weeds and thorns of so many competing messages. Jesus calls them the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. Does that sound at all familiar to you?

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Yet in those who receive the word, who take it to heart, it bears fruit abundantly. In the words of Isaiah: it accomplishes the purpose for which God sent it. From a single grain came many times more: 30 – 60 – 100 fold → Abundance.

Good things come to fruition when we listen, when we give Christ our full and undivided attention. Jesus saw firsthand how hard this can be for us – how hard it is to listen.

- * Maybe it is when our hearts get broken, cracked open by tragedy, that we are finally able to truly listen to God (after all, who was most eager to hear Jesus?)
- * Perhaps when we grow beyond the shallowness of short-sighted immaturity we become more able to take the gospel to heart.
- * Or when we finally see the lure of wealth for the thorny weed it truly is, maybe then there will be room for grace in our lives.

God's word is good seed. It still yields bountifully. It grows in us when we take the time to listen.

Faith is always a mystery – why some have it and others don't. The seed is widely scattered: the Good News is proclaimed not just to some, but to all. Faith in the gospel promise is a gift from God. To call faith a gift is to recognize it is God's doing – yet we have our small part to play all the same. A gift is truly and fully given only when it is received. When Jesus knocks on our door, our small but necessary part is to open that door and let him in. Like newborn hatchlings in the nest, we must open our mouths, our hearts, to be fed by God. Otherwise, we go hungry.

God is speaking to us all the time – just as radio waves are constantly being broadcast.

What you and I need to do is tune in.

Let the seed of God's word be planted in you.

Listen!

Amen.