

HEAR AND BELIEVE

Matthew 13:1-23

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

July 12, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 13, verses 1 through 23. In a mysterious and roundabout way, Jesus reveals why his ministry was often rejected and would eventually lead to the cross. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 13, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear.”

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

“ ‘You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises

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on account of the word, immediately he falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

You may be seated.

Blessed Lord, since You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Cade,

On October 24, 2004, you were baptized into Jesus Christ. As far as I can tell, I think it happened right there. That was the beginning of your faith.

Today you confirmed your faith in Jesus Christ. This is not the end of your faith. It is simply a moment in time where you said, “Yes, I believe what I have been taught from the Scriptures, and I desire to continue in it.” That’s a paraphrase of the vows you made.

The life of faith is difficult. In the parable we just heard, Jesus speaks of the many things in life—mainly the devil and his various tools—that would threaten our faith.

So I have two words for you today, one command and one promise. First, the command: treasure the Word of God. Second, the promise: The Holy Spirit will work through the Word to preserve you in the faith. The command and promise go together.

Remember what we required you to memorize. This is the Small Catechism’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith; in like manner as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in this Christian Church, He daily forgives abundantly all my sins and the sins of all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead and will grant everlasting life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.

In short, “I believe that my faith, from beginning to end, is the work of the Holy Spirit.” So one command and one promise: Treasure the Word of God. And through the Word, the Holy Spirit will preserve you in the faith.

I love the Jesus’ parables. By far, my favorite type of Scripture passage to preach on is Jesus’ parables. They make us think. And this is good. Sometimes we have to sit down in our comfy chairs with a cup of coffee and just think about them. And if that doesn’t work, maybe you mow the lawn or go for a bike ride, and you think about the parable the whole way. The parables provide an opportunity to meditate on the Word of God all day long. And sometimes, if you’re just stumped, you ask a friend, “What in the world is Jesus talking about?”

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The best part, of course, is when the mystery is finally revealed. And it's not that you marvel at your own intelligence by which you figured it out, but you marvel at the love and mercy and grace of God that are revealed in the parable.

Some parables are fairly easy to understand. Others are a bit more difficult. This is one of those parables that is extremely difficult, but then it becomes really easy, because Jesus tells us what it means. Jesus explains some of the parables, but not all of them. In this case, the explanation is reserved only for the disciples. So I want you to imagine the scene when Jesus first told this parable.

There was a great crowd that gathered around him. They wanted to hear him teach. That's why Jesus got into a boat. They didn't have microphones and PA systems back then, so they had to use natural amplification. Sound travels really well over water, so Jesus got into a boat while the crowd stood on the beach. And he tells them a story about a sower who sowed seeds all over the place: on the road, on the rocks, in the thorns, and finally in the good soil. And, as we might expect, the seed in the good soil is the only seed that endured and produced fruit. And that was the end of the parable. Jesus gave them no explanation. He just said, "**He who has ears, let him hear**" (13:9). And that was it. What in the world is Jesus talking about?

It's kind of like that weird uncle you have, where you ask him, "How do you think the Vikings will be this year?" So he says, "Let me tell you a story." And he tells you a story about when he was a kid and he could buy a candy bar for a nickel. And then you're too embarrassed to ask, "What are you talking about?" because it seems like he expects you to understand, but you don't. That's kind of like what's going on with Jesus here. I should maybe mention, since many of you know some of my uncles, that I don't have a weird uncle like that. All of my uncles are quite lucid.

All of these people came to hear Jesus teach, and all he does is tell them a story about a farmer, and they have no idea what the point is. What would you do if you came to church some Sunday, and when it comes time for the sermon, all I do is tell you a story? I don't even read the Scripture text. All I do is tell a thirty-four second story about my wife's garden, and I sit down. What would you think? You'd think I'm crazy.

If you're nice to me and you want to give me a chance at survival, you would come and visit me in the office and say, "Why was Sunday's sermon just a short story about a garden?" And that's what the disciples do with Jesus. They come to him later and ask, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (13:10).

And Jesus says, "**To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given**" (13:11). Jesus wasn't crazy. He spoke to the crowds in parables because he had something to say, but he didn't actually want everyone to understand it. He wanted those who believed in him to understand, but he wanted to hide this message from those who disbelieved. Those who believed in Jesus sought out the answer to the parable, and they got it. But those who didn't believe in Jesus wrote him off as crazy and never learned what he was saying.

The parable of the sower is a parable about Jesus. It's a parable about his ministry and the reality that some people received his preaching, while others rejected it, or maybe accepted it for a short while, but soon fell away. We might even say that the parable of the sower is a parable about Jesus' parables.

The parable of the sower is the queen of the parables. And I don't mean that it's the best parable. It's hard to say what the best parable is. Some people have favorites. For some it's the

Good Samaritan. For a lot of people it's the Prodigal Son. I think my favorite would have to be the parable of the wicked tenants. I guess I like a good tragedy. But I don't think I've ever heard anyone call the parable of the sower their favorite. But it's the queen of the parables. And what I mean by that is that it's the parable that introduces all the other parables. It teaches us why Jesus uses parables, and it teaches us how to read them. It also appears in all three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John doesn't really have parables. But when something shows up in all three of the synoptic gospels, that's a good indication that it's pretty important. And the reason it shows up in all three is because you can't really tell any other parables without first telling the parable of the sower. It's the queen of the parables.

It's a parable about Jesus' ministry and the Word of God. Jesus explains every detail for his disciples. The seed is the Word of God. More specifically, Jesus calls it **"The word of the kingdom"** (13:18).

The first thing Jesus preached was, **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"** (4:17). And this set the course for all of Jesus' preaching. That's why most of Jesus' parables begin with the phrase, **"The kingdom of heaven is like ..."** (e.g., 13:24, 31, 44, 45, 46; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:1, 14. Cf., 21:31, 43; 25:34). The key phrase in almost all of Jesus' parables is "Kingdom of Heaven." And this was also the central concept in Jesus' preaching and teaching. The basic point was that the Kingdom of Heaven had come to earth in Jesus Christ. It didn't come in military power, and it didn't have political borders. Rather, it came in the person of Jesus Christ. And so the Kingdom of Heaven isn't defined as a place so much as the activity of Jesus: healing the sick, driving out demons, and especially forgiving sins by preaching the Word of God. Preaching the Word and forgiving sins was the primary activity of Jesus. Many people believed and had their sins forgiven, but many people also disbelieved. They rejected the free and gracious gift. That's what the parable of the sower is about.

It deals with the reality that Jesus' ministry wasn't as outwardly successful as we might think it should be. Some people believed, and some didn't. You'd think that if you get the best preacher in the world, people will believe. But it doesn't always work.

We still deal with this today. We think that if we can get the best preacher, the best programs, and the best marketing strategy, we can evangelize our entire community. But it usually doesn't work. Now I'm all for doing everything to the very best of our ability. If we're going to do something, let's do it well. But the results are out of our control. And most of the time, the results fall short of our dreams.

We see this in Jesus' ministry. I think it's safe to assume that Jesus was the best preacher in the world. He is God, after all, and that's something that no other preacher has going for him. He also had the best object lessons. We call them "miracles." And they were the proof of what Jesus was teaching. But people still rejected him. Even people who witnessed the miracles firsthand rejected the teaching.

For example, in *The Gospel of John*, where Jesus feeds the five thousand, the crowd was so impressed that the next day they followed him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But Jesus didn't give them more bread. Instead, he preached to them, and most of them didn't like his preaching, so they quit following him (John 6).

Another example is in Matthew 12, just before the parable of the sower. Jesus was at a synagogue, and there he healed a man with a withered hand. How did the Pharisees react? They repented and believed in him, right? No! They conspired how to destroy him (12:9-14)! Then Jesus healed a man who was possessed by a demon. This convinced the Pharisees to believe,

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right? No! They accused Jesus of being the devil (12:22-24)! And it wasn't just the Pharisees, but many of the people followed the Pharisees instead of believing in Jesus.

Jesus came forgiving sins. And as proof of his authority to do so, he performed miracles. And people didn't believe. Why not? What in the world is going on?

Enter the parable of the sower. The Word will not bear fruit in every heart. That's just the way it is. You can have Jesus himself, preaching and performing miracles, and it's not always going to work. In fact, most of the time it doesn't work. I don't know that Jesus is trying to give an exact statistical model for how many people will actually believe and remain in the faith. But the ratio in the parable is one out of four, and that doesn't seem too far from reality. Over the course of the last two thousand years, the Church has grown exponentially. Today there are about two billion Christians around the world. But there are still far more who disbelieve. And when an unbeliever hears the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they usually don't believe it.

Sometimes the devil snatches the Word away (13:19). Sometimes a person believes, but the roots of faith don't go very deep into their heart, and tribulation and persecution causes them to fall away (13:21). Sometimes the love of the world chokes out the Word (13:22). Sometimes it endures and bears fruit (13:23).

So what do we do? What did Jesus do? Jesus decided to just give up and go back to heaven, right? No! For the sake of the few who would believe, Jesus endured. He suffered. He continued preaching to people who would not believe. He kept healing people to prove himself to other people who would eventually kill him. He did this for the sake of the few who would believe. He knew what he was getting into when he came.

This is the same God who sent prophets, often warning them, "Oh, by the way, no one's going to believe you, but go preach anyway." And this is the same Jesus who warned his apostles, "**You will be hated by all for my name's sake**" (10:22), but he sent them anyway.

Jesus knew this would happen to him as well. He knew that many would reject his teaching. He knew that some would even crucify him for it. But instead of being deterred, Jesus saw this as his very purpose for coming—not merely to have his teaching rejected, but to have his life rejected, and to have it be rejected for the sake of the few who would believe.

For those who believe, the rejection of Jesus becomes our life and salvation. At the same time that the people rejected Jesus, Jesus was bearing our sin in his body and being rejected by his Father. He took the condemnation we deserved, and he suffered it all for our sake.

All who believe this word receive forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Even this believing is not our doing, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. So we cling tightly to the Word of God. We treasure it above any earthly gift. And we pray that God would send his Holy Spirit to us that we might be granted repentance, and that the Holy Spirit would preserve this faith until the very end.

Merciful God, forgive us for every time we have carelessly dismissed your Word. Forgive us for every time we have resisted the Holy Spirit's call to repentance. Do not take your Word from us. Do not take your Holy Spirit from us. But be patient. Grant us forgiveness for the sake of Jesus Christ. And preserve us in your Word and in the true faith. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.