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The Gospel of Luke
XXIV. How Do We Hear?
Luke 8:1-15

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Lost among all the headlines of the past week was an absolutely earth-shattering, world-altering, scientific discovery. Researchers at the Stanford University School of Medicine announced that they had conclusively proven that teenagers do not listen to their parents! Shocking, right?! Actually, the study was pretty interesting. Researchers scanned the brains of 7- to 16-year-olds as they listened to the voices of either their mothers or unfamiliar women. In kids ages 7 to 12, certain regions of the brain – particularly those involved in detecting rewards and paying attention – responded far more strongly to mom’s voice than to the voice of an unknown woman. But in the same regions of the brain in teenagers, the unfamiliar voices elicited greater response than the voice of mom. Further, they found that this shift sets in between the ages of 13 and 14. The article goes on to cite evolutionary and developmental reasons for this shift in hearing.¹ But the real meaning of this discovery is clear: Parents, if your teenagers are not listening to you anymore, it is not your fault – it is entirely theirs. And teenagers, because your parents pay my salary, the only thing I can say is: “Please listen to your parents!”

The parable Jesus tells this morning is also about how we hear. In fact, the verb “to hear” appears seven times in short order, by my count. But, of course, the voice we are being summoned to hear by this parable is none less than the voice of God – His Word to us. What this parable is basically saying to us – the main point – is that how we hear the Word of God is the central determining factor of our life in this world, and in the next! But two other notes before we begin looking at the parable, which help put this conclusion into context. Jesus proclaims this parable to the crowd at the very height of His popularity. Meaning Jesus knew, with sadness no doubt, that the numbers meant nothing – that not everyone in that crowd was there for the right reason or listening to Him with faith. And second, note that all four soils hear the Word of God. Meaning that this is not a parable directed to the pagan world which has yet to hear the Word, but to the Church itself – to those who have already heard the Word, but which may or may not be receiving that Word like a seed in good soil, bearing fruit. In other words, this is a parable aimed directly to you and me – and to how we are hearing, as well as responding, to the seed of God’s Word.

So, let us attend to the Word of God before us this morning. “*A sower went out to sow,*” Jesus begins. But He is a careless sower – or perhaps simply an extravagant one. For He casts the seed in every direction, onto every different type of soil – a sower who clearly wants every type of soil to have at least the chance to receive the seed. The sower is Jesus, of course. And the seed, as He tells us, is the Word of God. Jesus has come into this world proclaiming the saving Word of God to all – that’s the set-up for the parable. But, alas, not every type of soil is receptive to the

seed – that is the conclusion. That not every human heart is willing to hear and rightly receive that saving Word.

Some of the seed, for example, falls along a path – hard ground, packed solid by the press of a multitude of passing feet. And the seed never has a chance of sprouting on such a surface. It just lies there, unable to find a way into the soil – until, at last, some birds come along and carry it away. The hardened soil of a hardened heart – closed off to Jesus before even the Word has a chance to get in. Unwilling to wrestle at all with that Word of God, a heart unwilling even to entertain the possibility that it might be both true and necessary. Soil and souls which have decided, for whatever reason, that there is nothing to hear, here in God's Word. That the Word of God is, to them, irrelevant and useless at best. In Jesus' day, the scribes and Pharisees, perhaps – whose minds were already made up about Jesus and His Word, whose hearts had already slammed shut to Jesus and His Word, whose ears do not hear. In our day, Christians, even those who perhaps faithfully sit in the pews every Sunday, but yet never once let themselves be moved, challenged, or changed by the Word of God they hear each Sunday. Some seed falls on hardened hearts and never even begins to grow, never even has a chance to take root and grow.

Some seed falls on rocky ground – an image that would have been very familiar to any Palestinian farmer of Jesus' day. Rocky ground, with just enough soil sitting on the surface to allow the seed to germinate – but with rocks just below that shallow soil, such that there is no room for deep roots to grow. All the growth is on the surface and superficial. And without those deep roots to sustain the growth, the sun comes out, the soil dries up, and the tender plant withers and dies away. Looking out at that great, big, record-setting crowd in front of Him, Jesus must have seen a lot of rocky soil. As long as He was performing miracles of healing and multiplying loaves and fish, they were all in with Jesus. But as soon as He begins talking about bearing a cross, about dying to self – as soon as He goes to Jerusalem literally to do those things Himself for our sake – that crowd will just wither up and disappear.

Peter was sort of like this at first. Peter the rock was, at first, rather rocky soil in His enthusiastic response to Jesus – but fell away the very moment things started to get a little bit heated. So, too, with many Christians still today. Hearing the Word, at first, with great enthusiasm – putting a Jesus is my co-pilot bumper sticker on the car, a WWJD bracelet on their wrist, and buying an over-sized Bible in a neon green cover in order to show everybody how excited they are about Jesus. But never really opening that Bible, never really asking what Jesus would do in the various circumstances of their life, never really entertaining the idea that Jesus should be allowed to take over the control of their life. Growing no deeper roots into Jesus and His Word. And then, as soon as it gets old and ordinary, or as soon as some sort of unexpected trouble comes – well, just like a plant with no roots withered by the heat of the day, their faith, such as it was, is gone. No roots, no depth, no real commitment, no real perseverance – like a seed sown on rocky soil.

Some seed falls on thorny ground. And at first it grows up good and strong – solid roots below and healthy leaves above. But it's not easy being a committed Christian in a world that does not honor Christ. It's not easy being a Christian in a culture that seems to be trying, in a thousand and one ways, to distract us from Christ. The stress at work, the demands of the social media feed, the money worries, the travelling soccer team practice schedule – on and on the list goes. Things of varying degrees of importance – but which, in the moment, somehow always seem

to be more important than the Jesus thing. The thorns springing up all around us, pulling us away from being truly committed to Christ, truly putting Christ first in every aspect, every decision, every priority of our lives. But we, nonetheless, consoling ourselves that we'll do better next time, we'll be sure to get back to church as soon as the season is over, someday when things settle down a little bit we'll get right back into the habit of caring about God again, get that devotional life fired up again, really get serious again about Sunday School and Wonderful Wednesdays again. Someday, the thorny soil says – all the while, in the meantime, those thorny vines of distraction and out of whack priorities just keep getting bigger, just keep getting a tighter grip upon our lives, simply because all our energy is being invested in those thorny vines and not on the one thing needful. Thorny soil, in which the seed, though well-rooted and green, is being allowed to be choked out by lesser things, lesser priorities, lesser goals.

But there is a fourth soil, says Jesus. Some of the seed falls into good soil – and the result is nothing short of amazing. Growth one hundred-fold – which would have been a bumper crop among bumper crops in Jesus' day. Growth one hundred-fold, bearing fruit in great abundance. A beauty to see and a blessing to all who come to see it. In other words, a true disciple of Jesus – the real thing, a Christian. Someone who not only hears the Word of God, but who holds that Word fast in an honest and good heart. Makes that Word the center, the fulcrum, the axis of their existence, the guiding light for all else in them and about them. With the result that, simply by what they have become through that hearing of the Word, as well as by how they have come to live and by what they do in response to that Word, they have become a source of inspiration and wise counsel and compassionate care and moral example and life-giving friendship, as well as a dispenser of hope and joy to all who know them. Persons in whom the Word of God dwells richly, and from whom the Spirit of Christ shines forth brightly. I've known some good soil Christians like that – haven't you? And their grace, the beauty of their being, makes me long to be a better soil for Christ myself – how about you?

“As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” Hold it fast in an honest and good heart. Meaning that they are in the Word of God consistently and wrestling with that Word continually. Meaning that they let that Word get down so deeply in their thinking and being that their lives begin bearing fruit for Jesus in a way that seems almost instinctive, natural, easy.

Gregory Jones, who teaches Christian ethics at Duke, was visiting with some old friends, a couple in their eighties whose health had been failing. The husband was confined to a wheelchair and struggling with dementia. He was in and out of the conversation and, at times, even had trouble recognizing his wife. Her health was better, although she was showing signs of wearing down from years of faithful caring for her husband. During the conversation, Jones brought up the countless ways in which this couple had been beacons of hospitality to Duke students through the years, particularly to the international students. Every Friday night, for example, for over thirty years, this couple had organized badminton matches in the campus gym. The wife estimated that over 3,000 students had participated in the fellowship and fun of those games. They welcomed countless students into their home for meals, especially if they heard that a student was going through a rough time. Their Christian hospitality had been a joyous rock for so many of those students and for the Duke community at large.

But this couple's practice of Christian hospitality went back even before their years at Duke. Jones had heard stories about this couple leading Bible studies for German prisoners of war in England during World War II. Jones asked the wife about those Bible studies, and she spoke about how moving it had been to read Scripture together with those prisoners in the midst of war. But their hospitality went even deeper than that. Each week, during those days of war, they would take a portion of their food rations and give it to others in need in their community. As word got around that they were doing this, other townspeople were drawn into this work of hospitality – they would bring food to this couple to be sure that they had enough. Jones says that as he listened to the wife talk about all this with deep humility and fondly remembered joy, he realized how deeply the Christian commitment to welcoming and caring for others in Christ's name ran as the great theme in this couple's life.

But Jones says he still wasn't prepared for what happened as he was leaving. The husband, who had not spoken much and had not really seemed to be following the conversation, said to Jones as he moved towards the door, *"Come and visit us again when you can. And, remember, if you ever need food or anything else, we will gladly offer you whatever we have on the stove or in the refrigerator. You always have a home here."* Jones was completely taken aback. Here was a man confined to a wheelchair, only intermittently able even to recall how many children he has, nonetheless continuing to reach out to others in Christian hospitality. Jones concludes the story of his visit with this observation: *"Hospitality had become so much a part of this couple's way of living as Christians that such gestures had become second nature. The husband literally did not need to think about what to do – his offer was an expression of what he and his wife had become through the years."*² A couple so steeped in the Word of Christ that the way of Christ had simply become an effortless and instinctive part of who they were and of how they lived. *"As for that in good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience."*

What sort of soil are we – right now, at this very moment in our lives? I think that's the first thing Jesus wants us to do in response to this parable – to examine ourselves, and to do so honestly. Ask ourselves, without any attempts at self-justification or self-deception, how we have been hearing the Word of God up till now. And then, second, to do this because I think Jesus is telling us, in this parable, that it is not too late to do better, to become better soil for His Word. That He has not given up on us yet – that the seed of His Word, itself, has the power to turn us into good soil, if we will but ask, if we will but genuinely make His Word our goal. After all, if Peter the rocky soil can become Peter the rock, so can the seed of God's Word work in us, improving the soil of our hearts and of our minds and of our lives.

And then, third – and most of all – is something we said back at the beginning. What Jesus is telling us, in this parable, is that how we hear the Word of God really is the single most important factor in our lives – not just as Christians, but simply as human beings. That our lives, literally, depend upon how we hear the Word of God. And that He Himself – Jesus the Sower – is continually casting the seed of His amazing grace upon us, so that one day – could it be this day?! – the seed of His Word might indeed find good soil and begin to blossom and flourish and bear fruit in us all.

¹ Laura Sanders, “Mom’s voice loses its grip for teens,” Science News, Vol. 201, No. 10 (June 4, 2022), p. 14.

² This and the quotes above, L. Gregory Jones, “Welcoming the Stranger,” Christian Century, Vol. 117, No. 2 (January 19, 2000), p. 58-60.