

Matthew 13:10-17, 44-50

“The Secret Message of Jesus: Hearing Loss, Kingdom Impairment”

January 11, 2009

GR FUMC

As the screen is lowered, let me make perfectly clear that the airing of this video clip is not in anyway intended as an endorsement of the Pepsi Company or any of its products by myself or the First United Methodist Church. I am, in fact, a Coke-fan, Diet Coke to be specific, and only drink Pepsi when all other options have been eliminated.

[\(YouTube video shown\)](#)

This ad was aired during the pregame portion of last year’s Super Bowl. I didn’t see it then, but I imagine that football fans all over America did the same thing I did when I first saw this on Youtube. They started fiddling with the sound button on the remote. What’s wrong with this thing? There’s no sound!

That’s the point, of course. A second Youtube video provides some background information on the ad. As one of the actors explains, deaf people spend most of their lives contending with a hearing world. This ad requires hearing people to spend one minute in the deaf world. It’s a world without sound, but it’s certainly not a world without meaning.

For a long time – millennia, in fact – deafness was associated with lack of intelligence, the inability to hear was assumed to include the inability to think. For thousands of years, the “deaf and dumb” as they were called, were regarded as ‘incompetent’ and were denied fundamental human rights , like the ability to inherit property, to marry, to receive education, and to have adequately challenging work.

It wasn't until the mid-eighteenth century that this situation began to change. And it wasn't until the middle of the twentieth century, in our own country, that American Sign Language was acknowledged as a complete, grammatical and fully effective language of its own, not a second-class version of spoken English.

Long before modern English existed, either in its spoken or signed form, Jesus knew that there was a difference between hearing and understanding.

“Why do you speak in parables?” his disciples asked. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah in his response: “The reason I speak to them in parables,” he says, “is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘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.’ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

Jesus taught in parables -- short, pithy stories that often have a twist at the end. Many parables will leave you with more questions than you had before you heard it. Apparently Jesus was the kind of teacher who would just stand up in a crowd, or wherever he happened to be, and start telling a story: “Once there was a farmer who started scattering seeds. Some fell on the road, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good ground. The seeds that fell on good ground did amazingly well. The seeds that fell elsewhere didn't.” End of story.

Then he probably walked away. You know – the way the preacher walks to side door after the service and waits for people to come by with their comments. If you and I had been in the crowd listening to Jesus that day, surely we would have been scratching our heads and asking each other ‘So what was that all about?’ [Robinson]

Most scholars agree that this particular parable of the farmer sowing the seed on different kinds of ground is probably as close to what Jesus truly said as we’ll ever get. Other portions of Scripture, including the explanation of this parable that begins where our reading ended, at verse 18, have so many layers of editorial comments and interpretations piled on top of Jesus’ sayings that it’s hard to tell what was originally his.

But scholars conclude that this parable, and others like it, are quite close to the original. One reason they think that is because the parable isn’t entirely clear; it leaves us wondering exactly what he meant; it provokes us into thinking more. And why would two or three centuries of Biblical editors leave something like that in...unless they believed it to be exactly what Jesus said?

“Why do you speak in parables?” the disciples ask. Why not be clearer, more direct, more obvious?

Our sermon series in this season of Epiphany, lasting until Ash Wednesday at the end of February, is called The Secret Message of Jesus. Gary and I are using the book of the same name by Brian McLaren, a well-known pastor and preacher, as the focus of this series. The book is written to be accessible to all readers, not just preachers and academics, but it’s not a quick read. In past sermon series that have used published works, we’ve sometimes made copies available at the church. We’re not doing that this

time because of the book's size and cost, but I encourage those of you who are interested to pick up a copy and read along with us over the next several weeks.

McLaren says that Jesus used parables because, in order to understand them, listeners have to do more than simply 'hear with their ears'; readers have to do more than 'read with their eyes.' Instead, "we have to invest ourselves in an imaginative search for meaning – a meaning that will surprise us when we discover it for ourselves." (45)

Jesus' is merely trying to convey information when he teaches. In the parable of the Sower and the Seeds, he's not trying to teach about agriculture or efficient gardening practices. He was trying to make something more important happen: the spiritual transformation of his hearers. "The form of the parable," writes McLaren, "beckons the hearer to explore new territory. It helps form a heart that is humble enough to admit it doesn't already understand and is thirsty enough to ask questions. In other words, a parable renders its hearers not as experts, not as know-it-alls, not as scholars...but as children" (46):

- children who are dependent on the one teaching them for wisdom and love;
- children who are thirsty to know about the world, God and themselves;
- children whose imaginations are not curtailed by the world's definitions of what is reasonable or appropriate;
- children whose egos don't get in the way of getting the point of a story.

A man once came to Buddha with an offering of flowers in his hands. Buddha looked up at him and said, "Drop it!"

The man couldn't believe he was being asked to drop the flowers. Then it occurred to him that perhaps Buddha was asking him to drop the flowers that he had in his left

hand, since to offer something with one's left hand was considered inauspicious and impolite. So he dropped the flowers that his left hand held.

And Buddha said to him, "Drop it!" This time, the man was so unnerved by Buddha's request that he simply dropped all the flowers and stood before Buddha empty-handed.

And Buddha smiled and said to him, "Drop it!" Perplexed, the man asked, "Buddha, what is it that I am supposed to drop?"

"Not the flowers, my son," said Buddha, "but the one who brought them."

(Robinson)

What is it we're supposed to drop? Could it be our resistance to becoming as a child in order to understand what we're being taught?

We want fast, painless, effortless information, not a slow, demanding, engaging transformation. Some will say 'I don't have time for this nonsense. I don't have time for childish stories about seeds and yeast and sheep.' These are the people the parable excludes. These are the ones who "see but do not perceive, hear but do not listen or understand." (47)

We might wish that no one was excluded from grasping the import of Jesus' parables. "But if it's the heart that counts," Brian McLaren says, "then the heart can't be coerced; nobody can be forced. They can be invited, attracted, intrigued, enticed, and challenged – but not forced. And that, perhaps, is the greatest genius of the parable: it doesn't grab you by the lapels and scream in your face, 'Repent, you vile sinner! Turn or

burn!’ Rather, it works gently, subtly, indirectly. It respects your dignity. It doesn’t batter you into submission but leaves you free to discover and choose for yourself.” (48)

Barry Robinson tells a story of the man he calls “the best preacher I’ve ever known,” Rev. Ben Hodder. “People would come out of church after one of his sermons with something to think about, something particularly uplifting or challenging or enlightening or entertaining.”

But on one particular Sunday, Ben got up to preach and just told a story about a farmer who went out to sow his seed. “Some seed fell on the road,” he said, “and got all trampled underfoot. Some fell on rocky ground and grew up too quickly and withered in the sun. Some fell among thorns and got the life strangled out of them. Some seed fell on good soil and produced an amazing harvest. Those of you with two good ears,” he said, “had better listen up!” Then he sat down and the organist started to play the next hymn.

People in the congregation looked at each other. Was that all? What was he talking about? What was he getting at? Are we supposed to know what he meant? A lot of people went away scratching their heads, some of them never got any farther than that. Others have come to understand the lessons of the parable, or – more accurately – they have come to ask the questions it inspires.

Questions like:

- Where, in my life, is the good soil that allows God’s Kingdom to grow in me? Where is the rocky soil that causes the Kingdom to wither?
- What is God harvesting through me? What are the fruits of my life?
- For what would I sell everything?

Friends, the kingdom of God is a treasure hidden in a field, a seed hidden in soil, yeast hidden in dough. It is a secret hidden in a parable. Human kingdoms advance by force and violence with falling bombs and flying bullets. God's kingdom advances by stories, parables, tales that are easily ignored and easily misunderstood.

Let us pray: Holy God, When you call to us, may we listen with open ears, understand with embracing hearts, and share your grace with others, even as we have been graced by Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

References

Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything*. (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2006).

Barry J. Robinson, "Get a Grip," Keeping the Faith in Babylon: A Pastoral Resource for Christians in Exile. Ordinary 15 - Year A. <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-or15-keeping.php>

Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A Journey Into the World of the Deaf*. (University of California Press, 1989).

Synopsis of the YouTube video used in today's sermon
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The opening is a woman using sign language to introduce Pepsico's Enable program, which promotes the inclusion of differently-abled people. (We read all sign language through subtitles.)

Then the ad begins.

A car drives down a dark, residential street at night. There are two men inside. The driver stops the car and switches on the overhead light. The passenger, using sign-language, says "Hey! We're gonna be late! We're gonna miss the kick-off."

"Which house is Bob's?" signs the driver, looking at the street of identical houses.

"I thought you knew."

"No! I thought you knew!"

They argue back and forth, for awhile.

"Great" says one, in defeat.

Then the driver starts to drive down the block, honking the car horn. We can't hear it, but the residents of the homes on the street can. As the honking continues and the neighborhood dogs start barking, lights inside the houses turn on, one by one.

Soon, only one house remains dark.

"That's it!" signs the driver.

"Yeah, ya think?" says the other sarcastically.

When their host opens the door to let them in, he apologizes to his annoyed neighbors, using a sign for "Sorry!" that anyone, deaf or hearing, can understand.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffrq6cUoE5A>