

*“Let Anyone with Ears...”*  
*A Sermon by Scott Herr*  
*First Presbyterian, New Canaan – July 16, 2023*

*Please Read:*  
*Isaiah 55:10-13*  
*Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

When Jesus says, “Let anyone with ears listen!” he is alerting us to the fact that what he is saying is not easy to understand and will require some careful attention and imagination to understand. I suspect most of us here today do indeed have ears. And while we may need hearing aids to hear what’s being said, the question is, are we making sense of what’s happening?

Matthew notes that Jesus told many things in parables. The word *parable* literally means, “thrown side by side.” It is the same Greek root from which our word *parabola* comes, which makes us think of a dish. It gathers information in order to intensify it toward a focal point. The question of course, is, “What’s the point?”

Professor Michael Ward, Philosopher at Christ Church, Oxford, talks about how C.S. Lewis' believed that we need imagination to make sense of what we're hearing...He relates the following untrue story:

*One day I took my car into the repair shop for its annual overhaul. At the end of the work I picked up the car and as I was driving out of the garage I realized I'd forgotten to check on something so called over to the car mechanic. Let's call him “Billy” for the sake of argument. And I said to Billy, “Well is my rear turn signal working?” Billy replied “Yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, yes...”*

Now, that little exchange encapsulates something of Lewis's definition of imagination. Imagination as far as Lewis was concerned is simply the organ of meaning. For Billy, the car mechanic, his imagination was sadly deficient. A flashing phenomenon on the back of a car as far as he was concerned could have only one possible meaning: *electrical failure*. You know he was able to see the raw data that the light was on, the light off, the light on, but he was unable to discover the correct *meaning* behind those brute facts. He had *sight* but he had no *insight*. He focused on the *externals* and failed to perceive their *inner* significance.

The same is true for us when we hear Jesus' parables. We may hear the story and even understand the basic facts of the story but have no idea how to make sense of the story in our lives. Imagination is required for Jesus' teachings to change us.

Let's push the turn signal analogy a little further. Not every flashing light on a car is meaningful. Sometimes there really are loose connections - the light flickers on and off in no particular rhythm and we would do best to describe that as

nonsensical. The connections in that case are arbitrary; random; meaningless. But if the connections are regular - if they are patterns - we would begin to conclude that they were significant. What kind of meaning would they have?

A true meaning showing that the driver intended to turn right or a false meaning indicating that the driver had just forgotten to return the turn signal lever to the off position? I'm sure you've had the experience many times of driving down the road and the car in front of you is flashing to go right, but it comes to a right-hand turn and it doesn't turn... and goes on another block, doesn't turn... that can go on for miles and miles past many right hand turning flashing away all the time. Eventually, you conclude the driver has no intention of turning right, but has forgotten to cancel the lever, or his stereo is on too loud he can't hear the tick tick tick of the turn signal. The flashing light means an inattentive driver, not turn right.

The point is that listening to Jesus' parables requires imagination to find the meaning of the parables. That's what Jesus means about those who have ears to hear! Put on your imagination ears and listen!

The first thing that strikes me about this parable is something so basic, I almost missed it myself. We often use the phrase *the Word of God*, or *the Word of the Lord*. Most people equate such phrases with the scriptures. Most sermons I've either given or heard preached on this text give reflection on God's Word and the different soils in which the word falls. But did you notice that Jesus does not say "the Word of the Lord." He did not say "the Word of God."

Jesus talks about the *Word of the Kingdom*. This points to Jesus' statement in verse 11 that the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven" will be revealed to his followers. Already, we have moved from Jesus on God, to Jesus on the ethics and sociology of God's Kingdom. What is the difference between the message about God and the message about the Kingdom of God? It seems that Jesus is inviting us to consider how the vision of the kingdom of God *gets lived out*, gets *embodied* in Christian community and the larger society. This is the first important point.

The second point is that Jesus says that the Word of the Kingdom has power to grow and produce a great harvest. That should give us hope, we who are very conscious that we are a smaller community from the "good old days" when this sanctuary was full and we had dozens of young families as part of our community.

Maybe there were words that were not the Word of the Kingdom, but hurtful, divisive, arrogant words... bad seed! But there are different places and seasons of

receptivity to the Word of the Kingdom. According to Jesus, if it's just off the way, it will be eaten up by the crows. If it is thrown about in rocky soil, of course it won't put down roots and so it will eventually wither and die when it gets hot. And then if there are other stronger plants around, like thorns, it will be suffocated by the thorn bushes and won't produce anything either. And then there is the good soil, and this soil is where the word is understood and bears fruit and yields geometric increase in harvest.

*Perhaps this parable is about receiving the word of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ.* Perhaps he is the first fruit, and as we allow him to grow in us and in our life together, we will see the Kingdom grow. We don't just hear and believe; we don't just pray for the Kingdom of God. We receive the Kingdom by receiving Jesus and allowing his love to be planted in our hearts and grow so that in us there will be a wonderful harvest of love and justice, of grace and truth, of forgiveness and compassion.

After his first best-selling book *Blue Like Jazz*, some film producers wanted to make a movie about Don Collins' life. But he realized that, honestly, his life wasn't that interesting. He didn't have serious goals or heroic causes. He confessed how he wanted a nice car to drive... He observes that many people spend years working so that they can drive a nice car. It's not a bad goal, it's just not inspiring. He said, "Nobody cries at the end of a movie about a guy who wants a Volvo."<sup>1</sup>

That line made me laugh. First because, who wants a Volvo?? I want an *Austin Martin!* ... Seriously, with my father-in-law's death, I started thinking again about what is my end game in life... What would a Kingdom harvest look like in me? Am I looking to bear fruit hundredfold, or twofold? Jesus doesn't define what a hundredfold harvest looks like, but I take some comfort in the Isaiah lesson that God's Word never returns void. I guess it has something to do with loving Kim and our children and our neighbors, and living more fully into my call...

Which focuses us on another point of this parable: that your fruitfulness will be maximized only when you become more the unique person God created and called *you* to be. Did you catch that simple line, "A sower went out to sow." It's almost too obvious!! Of course, *a sower* went out to *sow*. That's what a sower does. I'm Scott, and I've spent too many years trying to be someone else. I don't need to be Tim Keller or Barbara Brown Taylor or Nadia Bolz-Weber. I need to be Scott Herr. And you need to be you! A pastor went out to pastor. A teacher went out to teach. A banker went out to bank. A salesperson went out to sell. Don't waste another *minute* trying to live someone else's life, please! *A sower went out to sow.*

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<sup>1</sup> Don Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), xiii.

You're never going to be half as fruitful trying to live someone else's life as if you just live your own life and share the gifts unique to who you are!

Joanne Kathleen (J.K.) Rowling has fallen out of favor recently, but I still think the Harry Potter series was fantastic. Did you know she earned a French and classics degree? She spent a year in Paris as a student and taught French in England. She went through some pretty hard times; married and had a child but then was thrown out of her house after a fierce argument. She finished the first *Harry Potter* book as a single mom, while working full time. She often would write in restaurants, where she and her daughter could stay warm. She was solidly poor as she finished the first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, and now of course she is living in a castle...

The point is not that we should all write children's stories and get rich, but rather remember that we were made for something much more than what most people see, and sometimes what even we can imagine! Perhaps we have to start with those areas of brokenness in our lives, the tough soil places? If we open ourselves to God, something new will grow!

According to Jesus, the Word of the Kingdom changes everything. He is the Word, and as he collides with your lesser idols and life goals and achievements (hopefully more than a Volvo!), he will make a kingdom impact in and through you. This is the point: It's all about the *Kingdom of God*, the God reality that is even now breaking forth into your life. You were meant for more. And we are called, we are beckoned, we are invited to step out of the dead-end streets of meaningless "yes, no, yes, no" of this world, and begin to embrace God's Kingdom now.

So, the point is, like a seed, the word of the kingdom starts with something very small but grows. It might be repentance. It might be rest. It might be truth. It might be imagination. It might be forgiveness. It might be love. It only takes a little, but once you start hearing and receiving, it can't help but grow so that you are harvesting and sharing... "Let anyone with ears listen!"

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*