

“Hearing, Seeing And Understanding”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house
and sat beside the sea.

Such great crowds gathered around him
that he got into a boat and sat there,
while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

And he told them many things in parables, saying:

“Listen! A sower went out to sow.

And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path,
and the birds came and ate them up.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground,
where they did not have much soil,
and they sprang up quickly,
since they had no depth of soil.

But when the sun rose, they were scorched;
and since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Let anyone with ears listen!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower.

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom
and does not understand it,
the evil one comes and snatches away
what is sown in the heart;
this is what was sown on the path.

As for what was sown on rocky ground,
this is the one who hears the word
and immediately receives it with joy;
yet such a person has no root,
but endures only for a while,
and when trouble or persecution
arises on account of the word,
that person immediately falls away.

As for what was sown among thorns,
this is the one who hears the word,
but the cares of the world
and the lure of wealth choke the word,
and it yields nothing.

But as for what was sown on good soil,
this is the one who hears the word and understands it,
who indeed bears fruit and yields,
in one case a hundredfold,
in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Hearing, Seeing And Understanding

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 16, 2023

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I.

Fortunately for *you* and unfortunately for *me*, this is my *third* attempt at today's sermon. While a fit and start is not unusual, a third swing at the ball is almost unheard of; especially when I had completed half of a sermon on that second try. This week, though, I had a rather ordinary event which sent me right back to the drawing board with eraser in hand.

To give you the context, last Sunday's sermon was about manifesting things in our lives through means which might be mystical but, more often than not, are quite mundane. I told the story about how a straight-shaft weed-whacker manifested in my life just two days after deciding not to buy one. The experience offered a lesson about our ability to manifest things, events and people in our own lives, but how people are often quite resistant or reluctant to choose to do so. While mysticism may surely be involved in certain manifestations, the truth is it is the intention one has, and effort one makes to manifest, that matters most.

II.

It would seem that one parishioner in particular really took this lesson to heart. Following the worship service last week, Barb Brown approached me about the aforementioned straight-shaft weed-whacker (to which I attached a rather fierce metal tri-blade capable of cutting anything from grass to a small sapling) and asked if she might be able to borrow it; I told her of course she could. Seems she has a good-sized patch of lawn which had been let go for too long and your typical, fishing line style weed-whacker was now of little use as the growth had become too stalky.

The next day I texted her and asked just how big of an area she was talking, so she sent a photo and approximate dimensions. I looked at the weather and my work calendar and texted a response saying Linda and I would be there at 9 a.m. Tuesday morning; while she and Linda visited I would weed-whack the lawn. Which is exactly what we did.

III.

When I first got into ministry it was clear that, for me, the job description would always include the caveat, “and other duties as assigned.” Over the past 30 years, I have taken on any number of tasks for a parade of parishioners beyond the usual prayers, pastoral visits and counseling one would normally expect. These have ranged from filling bird feeders, moving furniture and heavy objects, checking sump-pumps, simple carpentry, driving lessons, providing transportation to medical appointments and the ER, loaning my car or motorcycle, watching kids, co-signing a loan, offering our home/cottage, hosting holiday meals at the manse, providing food to any number of folk, shoveling walks and clearing driveways, attending art openings, athletic events, plays and concerts, going grocery shopping, picking up prescriptions, unclogging drains, picture hanging, computer tech work, and, of course, setting the correct date/time on any numbers of VCRs. Once, I even had to check a parishioner’s home for a ghost (more than once, actually).

IV.

In all those years, however, never once did I weed-whack someone’s lawn; that is, until this past week. In spite of Barb’s protestations (and there were many) come Tuesday morning I loaded up my truck with both the curved and straight-shaft weed-whackers, plenty of two-cycle gas, safety goggles, ear protectors and gloves, and Linda and I set off over-land to Barb’s house on the river; with the hour drive there, then back again, being the furthest I have ever driven my truck.

I did this for two reasons. One had to do with Barb but the other had to do with me. While prayer is certainly important, sometimes the best way to help a person is to actually *do* something tangible in their life which serves lightens their load; even just a little bit. Beyond the actual work done, the kindness we show to others provides a real boost of spirit and helps folks realize they don’t walk alone.

V.

The other reason I did the weed-whacking is that never once in all the many years that Barb has been part of our church have I ever been to her house; moreover, I had only the vaguest sense of where that house might be located.

While I may not have actually been *inside* the home of each person in our congregation, in the instance of almost every other parishioner I can tell you where they live and, at the very least, have driven by their house. All except for Barb. Which, for me, had been a long-standing issue of the mildly nagging variety. Of course, there is a very good reason for this as Barb's house is on the way to exactly nowhere; at least for me in my life.

Beyond having long-felt that I *should* make a trip out to Barb's house, the truth is I have very much *wanted* to do so as I have found Barb to be one of the most hope-filled and joyous people in our church. She is a bright light who brings much good to the world and, especially, to our life together as a church family. Did I, as her minister, *owe* her a visit? Absolutely.

VI.

That, however, is *not* the reason I found myself breaking a sweat Tuesday morning weed-whacking Barb's lawn; once with the metal bladed straight-shaft, then again with the regular curved-shaft, then raking up and removing all the clippings. The *real* reason I did this is because I wanted to come to know Barb in *her* life; as a big part of coming to know any person is seeing where they live and, later, being able to picture them in their own space, surrounded by the things they love and the stuff that they do.

Set back off the road, at a beautiful spot on the St. Lawrence River below Morristown, Barb has an incredibly charming, cedar-shake, sea coast evoking house that is both airy and open while, at the same time, cute and cozy and filled with a life-time of living. While I certainly had a good measure of Barb prior to Tuesday, I now have a fuller and deeper understanding of who she is in *her* life. What a gift.

VII.

Today's scripture reading from Matthew 13, the parable of the sower, finds Jesus painting a picture of the challenges of discipleship, and of the challenge to the Disciples in bringing the word of the kingdom, the Gospel, to the world; i.e., the seed. Here, in this illustration, Jesus warns of seed sown on the path of hard hearts which is easily snatched away by evil, the seed sown on rocky ground which withers as it fails to take root after an initial flourish, and seed sown among thorns which is choked by the cares of the world and lure of wealth. However, when the seeds of the Gospel are sown in good soil within

those who hear and understand the Word, then such seed bears fruit in varying amounts of yield. Blah, blah, blah.

Which is how *I* heard it when I first read it, anyway; and which is why *I* ended up tossing not just my first crack at today's sermon, but a second, half-finished sermon as well. Totally uninspired attempts to check the box; which, as I said at the start, is fortunate for you.

VIII.

Unfortunately for me, after 30 years of preaching, this is more and more the case. With the lectionary cycling every 3 years it means that, generally speaking, *I* am now preaching on any given passage for the *10th* time. Even worse, if you are any kind of regular church-goer of a certain age, *you* have probably heard a sermon based on the same passage 15 or 20 times. I mean, really, enough is enough; what more needs to be said? Blah, blah, blah.

All of which starts me to wondering if perhaps it is the case that there is some secret contract between preacher and church-goer, one that I'm only now catching on to, that monotony, repetition, and a lack of inspiration are givens, to be expected, and are more or less ok (so long as the sermons are *short*). Please, as is the case with spinach in one's teeth, one's fly being open, egg yoke in one's beard or toilet paper stuck to one's shoe, just pull me aside quietly and let me know I have a "Kick Me" sign taped to the back of my pulpit robe.

IX.

That said, and regardless if such a secret contract exists, the fact of the matter is I do not write sermons for *you*; I do so for *myself* as the spiritual journey is, for me, an imperative. Though it requires a good bit of time, effort and more patience than you would imagine, I have found that if I can just hang in there long enough with a passage, usually some new and larger pearl of wisdom eventually emerges; even from an old chestnut like the one we have before us for today, the parable of the sower.

While I have spent countless hours (and years) pondering the five varieties of places that the seeds of the Gospel may be sown, the exposed path, the rocky place with no depth of soil, the scorched place where no deep roots are sunk, the thorny place which choke out the seed and, finally, the good soil

where the Gospel might grow, flourish and yield different measures of fruit, it never dawned on me until I got to weed-whacking Barb's lawn that these places represent our very lives.

X.

Ironically, such a realization had little to do with the actual weeds I just happened to be whacking, and everything to do with Barb manifesting me so that I would come and understand her in the context of her own home, in her own space, and in her own life. Usually, when we hear the parable of the Sower, we start by considering the seed and where it gets sown. This time around, thanks to Barb, I started with a consideration of the harvest and magnitude of fruit that the Good News of the Gospel can bring to one's life and, then, worked backwards to the seed.

I recognized that at various points in her life Barb had either endured or avoided altogether the cares of the world, the trappings of wealth, troubles and persecutions, and a lack of depth of soil in which to root oneself. That day, looking at Barb's physical space and how she has made it her own home, I realized that in her the joy of the Gospel had not only survived, but thrived. Not just to *her* benefit, but to the benefit of *all* those around her; *especially* our church.

XI.

As we all know, and to which each of us can testify, the life of faith is not without its temptations, troubles and anguish. The *trick* is hearing, seeing and understanding the joy of the Gospel that exists all around us, all the time; and how it has already been sown deep within our hearts such that our lives might bear, yield and share a harvest of joy *in* this world and *with* this world. Let anyone with ears listen! Amen.