

Sunday, July 16, 2017 – Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
“Take Care How You Hear”

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Adapted from CJ 2011

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

If you grew up in the church maybe someone along the way said to you that hearing the Bible affects your living. Only the Word of God can create faith in our hearts and good in our lives. The more we hear the Word of God, therefore, the stronger our faith and the better our behavior become. Right? Right!

A seminary professor once said this was the tipping point for his decision to accept a call to teach. “Look at all the additional opportunities I will have to hear God’s word in the daily chapel services,” he said. “Why, in no time at all I should be moving mountains!” He soon discovered the mountains are still there. You don’t have to be a seminary professor to relate. I suspect many of us have made this discovery – we worship, we study, we pray and too many mountains are still there.

Worse yet, we find ourselves on occasion becoming less attentive and less enthusiastic about hearing the Word than ever before. How devastatingly applicable have been the words we sometimes sing in the offertory at the 8am service, right after another unlistened-to Sunday sermon and how fervently we have prayed them: “. . . renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation . . .”

Well, there’s the problem: all this hearing and things seem to be getting worse, not better as the Scriptures promise. What’s the cause?

Part of the cause is probably natural. Weekly church services, daily quiet time for reading Scripture and prayer—one can gradually assume a take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward them. Furthermore, going from our workaday routines and into church requires a shifting of gears, and sometimes our transmissions aren’t up to it. The late hour you got to bed, the one for the road that you took, the social blunder you made, the test you blew, the question you didn’t get to ask in class, the text you shouldn’t have sent – the thoughts of all these go with us to church and interfere with our receptivity of the word. And let’s face it, sometimes the preacher

hasn't done his homework. He's dull, unprepared, or long-winded, and it requires a herculean effort as well as a heap of faith and charity to tune in to him.

Another part of the cause is supernatural. I mean the devil. We don't always give him his due. Well, the parable of the sower and the seed, our text, surely does. It says quite flatly, "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." I think many of us have experienced this. We can listen to the same series we've watched four times over on Netflix drone on in the background, we can tune in on a political speech riddled with clichés and abstractions and delivered in an asinine manner, but when it comes a sermon, a message of life and death, and we're not listening! What but a devil can account for such perversity? And have you ever noticed what you're thinking about when you're being inattentive during a sermon? Is it about how you can help your neighbor? Carefully considering a kind gesture for your frazzled spouse? C'mon, be honest, you aren't. The appointment coming up tomorrow? Well, maybe. But what is it? Wine, women and song! No question about where those thoughts come from. There is no better empirical evidence for the existence of satan—and I'm not joking now—no better empirical evidence than the depravity of the things a person can think about during a sermon, and only during a sermon.

But the part of the cause I want to call attention to today is the thing our parable emphasizes. And that is that living affects hearing—a classic flip upside down of the more familiar scriptural truth that hearing affects living. You see, there are two sides to this coin. Not only hearing affects living, but also living affects hearing. Although we can do nothing to add to the power of God's Word, we most certainly can do something to get in its way. As Jesus makes very clear, if we're choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, we bring no fruit to perfection. Too many thorns in our lives—such things as carelessness, indifference, worry, grudges, stuff we want, pleasure—can choke the word of God and inhibit its success. How come our faith is weaker and our good works fewer even though we're attending more services than ever before, or reading it daily? How come we're hearing God's Word more but enjoying it less? These developments don't prove that the Bible is lying when it says that the more we feed on God's Word, the better we get. They only remind us of another truth the Bible tells us

(especially Jesus' words this morning) – if we have too many thorns in our lives, God can't get a word in edgewise. If our house is filled with unclean spirits, the Holy Spirit can't crowd in, there's simply no room for him.

The point of our text might come out better in Luke's version of the same parable, "Take care then how you hear." You see, it's not only important *that* we hear the word of God, it's equally important *how* we hear the word of God.

Now remember this, although the emphasis of our parable is on the power of the soil to impact the seed, the Good News of our text is that the seed alone (the message of Christ crucified and risen for us) can make the soil grow things—such as faith and thinking, saying and doing good things.

So the next time you're bugged at the lack of connection between your hearing of God's Word and why it matters for your life, don't right away blame the church or the preacher, fault the system, or put your hope in some reform, whether more traditional or more contemporary, of the service. Just check your thorns, that's all. Maybe this life of easy conquests and frequent cocktails and off-color stories and monthly payments isn't so innocuous as it appears. It's just possible that these things are choking the Word of God in our lives or putting up interference, like too much information and not enough bandwidth and you're left with that neverending spinning wheel.

"Take care then how you hear." Bad living makes for poor hearing—which, in turn, makes for more bad living. The thing snowballs. We get caught in a vicious circle, and the mystery of our parable suddenly dissolves – or as Luke puts it, "for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."

But, thank God, there is the other circle too. Careful hearing makes for good living—which, in turn again, makes for more careful hearing. Let's give God's Word every chance we can. After all, it is "the power of God unto salvation." It does not return void. Its account of God redeeming us through his life, death, and resurrection works wonders on us. This thing snowballs too. Caught up in this circle, we discover it to be a glorious circle, the circle described

by our parable when it says, “for to the one who has, more will be given.” In Jesus’ name,
Amen.