Four Hearts

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 8:4-15

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Robert McKee is a well-known Hollywood screenwriter. His book *Story* is considered a must-read by movie producers and advertising agencies alike. An interviewer asked him recently how to write good stories in an age when people are reading less and displaying shorter attention spans.

Let me take you back to a highly-acclaimed Microsoft study from several years ago. The research suggests our attention spans have fallen from twelve seconds in 2000 to eight seconds in 2013. What made the headlines in this study is that our attentions spans are now shorter than that of goldfish.

McKee challenges the notion that we have shorter attention spans. “There is nothing wrong with our powers of concentration. We are perfectly capable of paying attention to whatever interests us. How is it that you can watch Netflix for hours on end? Our attention spans are not the problem. What is shrinking is our interest spans. We no longer watch or read anything that does not hold our interest.”

My sentiments entirely. People have shorter interest spans. Let me carry this thought forward to today’s lesson from Luke’s gospel. It all comes down to interest. “Whoever has ears to hear will hear.” Those who are not interested in what Jesus says will not hear him.

Today, we come to the eighth chapter of Luke’s gospel. A great throng of people has been following Jesus around.
They are curious about Jesus’ teachings. They are also desperate for a cure.

Jesus often teaches using parables. Parables are stories drawn from everyday life to teach truths about the kingdom of God. Jesus begins, “A farmer went out to sow seed” (8:5). Given that Jesus preaches out in the open air, perhaps he gestures in the direction of an actual farmer sowing seed.

The farmer Jesus portrays in his parable carries a seed sack slung over his shoulders, scattering seed by hand. Each step the farmer takes, he throws the seed in every direction. Farmers call it “broadcast sowing.”

“Some seed fell on hard soil” (8:5). It falls on paths worn hard by foot traffic. Since the seed cannot penetrate the hard soil, it lays helpless on the surface, later eaten by birds.

“Some seed fell on rocky soil” (8:6). While this seed manages to germinate, it cannot put down roots in the rocky terrain. Its tender shoots wither in the noonday sun.

“Some seed fell among thorns” (8:7). This seed is no match to compete with weeds and thorns for nutrition and sunlight. Much like the seed in rocky soil, it fails to reach maturity and produce fruit.

“Some seed fell on good soil. It yielded a crop a hundred times more than was sown” (8:8). Normally a tenfold
increase would equate to bumper crop. A hundred-fold increase would be a yield of unimaginable proportions.

Jesus concludes his parable, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear” (8:8).

Later, the disciples ask Jesus to explain his parable. Jesus tells them, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God have been given to you, but to others I speak in parables so that ‘though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand’” (8:9-10).

It sounds as though Jesus is being purposely vague to outsiders about the meaning of his parable when he cites the verse, “through seeing, they may not see; through hearing, they may not hear” (Isaiah 6:9). This contradicts everything we know about Jesus. He intends for people to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

Yet there is more here than meets the eye. Religious leaders already have written Jesus off. Why would Jesus waste a perfectly good parable on hardhearted people? Jesus’ parables function much like riddles in teasing the mind into active thought and imagination. Jesus says, in so many words, if you want to understand my parables, you will. If you don’t you won’t. The words of Jeremiah the prophet come to mind: “Listen, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear” (Jeremiah 5:21; also Ezekiel 12:2).

Jesus complies with their request to explain his parable, something he does only on rare occasions. The seed in the parable stands for the Word of God, namely the Old Testament and Jesus’ teachings. The seed as God’s Word
functions like a key in unlocking the mysteries of the four soils. Pay attention to the repetition of “Word” and “hear” in the verses that conclude his parable.

The hard soil represents people “who hear but the devil comes and snatches away the Word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved” (8:12). People hardened to the gospel become easy pickings for the devil’s lure.

The rocky soil represents those “who receive the Word with joy when they hear it but they have no root. In a time of testing, they fall away” (8:13). They seem interested for a time, yet the feeling doesn’t last.

The seed planted in thorny soil represents those “who hear [the Word], but the worries, riches and pleasures of this life choke the seed” (8:14). Their initial burst of enthusiasm to hear the Word is swallowed up by competing interests. “Worries, riches and pleasures” pretty much says it all.

The seed planted in good soil represents those “who hear the Word and retain it” (8:15). Four times in quick succession, Jesus underscores the importance of hearing the Word. In the teaching that follows this parable,
Jesus admonishes his hearers “to consider carefully how you listen” (8:18).

At the close of the chapter, Jesus teaches a massive crowd of people in someone’s home. A message circulates through the crowd that Jesus’ mother and brothers want a private audience with him. Jesus’ response blows everybody away. “My mother and brothers are those who hear the Word and put it into practice” (8:21).

Jesus’ closing statement in this parable, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear,” is his way of saying, “Listen up. Pay attention. What I’m saying is real important.”

So what difference does this sermon make in our lives? Two applications come to mind: one has to do with God as Sower and the other applies to us as soil.

First, God is an extravagant sower. Throughout his ministry, Jesus scatters seed everywhere, along the hard path, rocky soil and among thorns. Why does he bother to sow seed into such unpromising soil?

I would have been more circumspect in sowing seed. I would have planted my seeds in nice, neat rows. I would have saved my seed for the fertile soil. Not Jesus. He sows seeds of faith everywhere.

I bet my Sunday school teacher, Miss Buckholtz, God rest her soul, had not a clue that the seeds of faith she was trying to sow in my life would one day take root and grow. I bet some people who planted seeds of faith in your life wondered the same.
Listen up, parents and grandparents, teachers and coaches. You never know what seeds you are sowing today will yield tomorrow in children’s lives, so keep sowing. Those of you working with teenagers may feel as though the only kind of seed taking root in their lives right now is wild oats. That’s okay; keep sowing. One day this seed may find fertile soil. I can attest to this fact, both as a pastor and as a father of two former teenagers.

So much for God as sower. Second, we turn to us as soil. The four types of soil in our parable represent our four hearts in response to God’s word. Four soils: four hearts.

Some of us have hard hearts. There is no way God’s Word can penetrate our stubborn hearts. We may have ears on the side of our heads, but our hearts are as hard as asphalt. Let the Psalmist sound the alarm, “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (95:7-8).

Some of us have shallow hearts. I’ve known plenty of people through the years who demonstrate an initial boost of enthusiasm for faith. They come to church for a time, ready to learn and eager to grow. When trials come their way and God does not come through for them in ways they expect, they vaporize.

Some of us have divided hearts. The Word of God takes root in our hearts, but competing interests rival for our attention. Even good things, like making a living or the pursuit of pleasure, can substitute for God. This divided heart syndrome is a particular malady for people living in Northern Virginia. As you watch the Super Bowl, advertisers will portray the good life as faster connectivity, a new car or better beer. Don’t buy it.
Some of us have receptive hearts. Sometimes, the Word finds fertile soil.

What kind of heart are you—hard, shallow, divided or receptive? If you are having a hard time deciding among the four, I can attest that you can be more than one type. I fluctuate back and forth. Some days, I am receptive. Other days, I am hard-hearted.

Are you teachable? Do you come to worship with arms folded, resistant to change, or do you come with open hands to receive from God? Are you unwilling to move outside your comfort zone or willing to step into the future with God?

Are you listening? God speaks through Scripture. God speaks through His people. God speaks through experience and the still, small voice of conscience. Are you listening for His Word? “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”