

TEXT: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
THEME: Every word is a seed
SUBJECT: Listening
TITLE: Listening to Your Life

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
12 July 2020
Messiah Moravian
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Listen, therefore, to the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the Kingdom and does not understand, the wicked one comes and seizes away what has been sown in his heart; this is what was sown beside the path. And the word sown upon stony places: this is the one who hears the word and immediately accepts it with joy; but he does not hold the root within himself and it is temporary, and when tribulation and persecution come on account of the word he immediately falters. But what is sown among the thorns: this is the one who hears the word, and the anxiety of this life and the beguilement of riches throttle the word, and it becomes fruitless. But the word sown upon the good soil: this is the one who, hearing and understanding the word, bears fruit, one a hundredfold, another sixtyfold, another thirtyfold. (David Bentley Hart's translation of Matthew 13:18-23)

Ulrich Luz, author of a three volume commentary on the Gospel of Matthew writes, "This text is understood correctly only when hearers understand it **self-critically** as a question to themselves." The parable itself is in the indicative mood. In simple statements of fact it describes how life works. The only imperative is in the introduction: **Listen.**

We benefit from the wisdom of this parable not by judging others whose hearts are hard, stony or thorny, nor by judging ourselves. We benefit from the wisdom of this parable by learning to listen to our hearts, by learning to read our experiences and understand our responses to life. By a "heightened pitch of attention" (Geoffrey Hill), we grow in self-understanding which becomes self-knowledge when we act upon what we hear.

Every moment and every event of your life plants something in your soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in our minds and wills. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because we are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love. (Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*)

The poet, William Stafford, puts it this way: "You always live so, a being that receives, or partly receives, or fails to receive each moment's touch." Our receptivity to what each moment brings is related to our capacity in that moment to listen. Some moments see us preoccupied, distracted, resistant. The condition of our hearts affects our capacity to receive seeds of new life.

In the parable everyone hears but not everyone understands. Hearing has a somewhat passive connotation; deep listening is a profoundly active turning toward. When we listen we not only hear the voice of the other, but we listen inwardly to signals emanating from the deepest levels of our own being.

A contemporary poem, “There Is a Place Beyond Ambition,” by Mary Oliver, serves as commentary on our text:

When the flute players
couldn't think of what to say next

they laid down their pipes,
then they lay down themselves
beside the river

and just listened.
Some of them, after a while,
jumped up
and disappeared back inside the busy town.
But the rest—
so quiet, not even thoughtful—
are still there,

still listening.

Imagine a ruined amphitheater on the outskirts of town. As the town's busy life has moved on, as the generations have come and gone, its inhabitants have almost completely forgotten about the amphitheater, which lies hidden in a pine wood to the south of town. A few professors of ancient history know about it, but they never visit it any more because it holds nothing more for them to research. In a place that was once filled with human performers and human listeners, the song of the cicada is the only sound. It is deserted.

Until, one day, mysteriously, a child appears from no-one-knows-where and takes up residence in the ruins. She is of indeterminate age — perhaps about 12 — and she has bare feet and wild, uncombed hair. She has a patchwork skirt and an oversized man's jacket with lots of pockets in it. Her name is Momo.

She is the creation of the German writer Michael Ende, who first published her story in the 1970's. The people of the region initially find her strange — she was, writes Ende, “a little shocking to people who valued cleanliness and order.” But very quickly they come to love her and depend on her. Their care is expressed both in the gifts and supplies they bring her and in their efforts to make her dwelling more habitable. She owned nothing but what she found or was given. Their dependency on her grows in response to an extraordinary gift that she has.

The gift is not a magic power — though its results sometimes seem magical. Nor is it some very exotic skill or talent. It is the ability to listen. “Only very few people can *really* listen,” remarks the narrator. Momo can do it like no other; she listens with complete attentiveness and sympathy.

Her powers extend to non-human creatures too. A small boy brings his canary to Momo because it won't sing. Momo sits and listens to it for a whole week until finally it begins to trill and bubble with song again.

On clear, starry nights, Momo sometimes sits in the middle of the amphitheater beneath the star-strewn heavens and feels as though she is cupped within a huge ear, which tunes her to a soft and yet powerful music in the spheres that speak strangely to her heart. Momo's quality of listening is a power that any reader of her story can aspire to share with her.

Contemplation is the deepest form of listening. Walking in the woods, gazing at a tree in silence for an hour, sitting at your desk slowly reading and rereading a text, being with another person in silence, listening deeper and ever deeper to the voice within, we find or create a sense of right relationship with one another, with the world around us, and with ourselves. The urge to jump up and return to the busy town will be overwhelming.

PRAYER: "The Mind's Home within the Heart" by St Nicodemos (1749-1809), a monk. Adapted.

All things find refreshing
calm and peace when they
have found their center.
As the lowly snail finds rest
within its crusty shell,
as an octopus tucked within
its still chamber, as the fox
within its den, the bird
folded into its nest, so the man
whose mind—now stuttering
in distraction—seeks his latent,
natural capacity to rest, finds
stillness when it enters the heart,
the subtle and the inner man.

As the animals, when troubled
or raised to fear, run directly
to their dens to be protected,
so also the mind of man, when
assaulted by evil thought
or any manner of internal
or external threat, must know
to rush to the heart and be
still there.