

Do you ever do the riddles or brain teasers in the newspaper? When she was Chaplain working at Judson Park Retirement Community Pastor Barbara was always on the lookout for good ones to use in the classes she held in their Village memory unit. She wanted to help folk keep their mental faculties sharp. She liked this one but thought it a bit much for them. But I think it's just about right for us to try. Ready?

So, you're the bus driver and you drive 3 blocks and pick up 2 people. You drive 3 more blocks and 1 person gets off. You drive around the corner and pick up 5 more people. Then, during the next hour, 18 different people get on the bus and 13 of the people on the bus, get off. So, here's the question: How old is the bus driver?

Now, when I was a professor in the classroom posing a puzzler like this, I might let the students do the mental computations and then do break-out groups to see what they came up with. But this is a sermon, so I'll just ask? How many know the answer? Raise your hand.

Well, here's the thing. The riddle starts off by saying, "You're the bus driver." So you already know how old you are. How many people get on or off the bus is just a distraction that clarifies the distinction between hearing and listening.

What we know is that normally people are fairly good at hearing but less adept at actually listening. That's because real listening is hard work. It's easy to get distracted. And listening is the one thing more important than anything else Jesus asked his disciples to do: "Listen!" "Pay Attention!" Jesus says that 10 times in 10 of the 33 verses that make up Mark, Chapter 4. That's almost 1/3 of the verses where he says things like "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen." Or, "Pay attention to what you hear."

Now, what Jesus says in the parable we heard read today seems so familiar we tend to think we already know what it means. Do we really? Because this is a riddle all about how easy it is to get distracted. Even his disciples who had been hearing him constantly preach about the Kingdom Come got confused. They heard what he said, but were having problems with listening.

Of course, most of those folks just wanted Jesus to be a Messiah who would rid them of Roman rule—a Messiah who would fix all their problems. And too often that's what we want too, right? Someone to come and fix things. But God wants more than that. In fact, God has much bigger plans for us than that. The "miracle of productivity" at the heart of this parable promises if people really listen, God can actually do more than we could ever imagine. And that's the secret of the Kingdom in this parable. What does God want from us? To be good soil. That's it. The miracle promised here is, if we are willing to be good soil for the message of the Gospel, God can make the Kingdom Come happen all around us.

A few facts about this parable need to be said at the outset.

- First, it's considered the Parable above all Parables because it's in all four Gospels and has more verses devoted to it and Jesus' explanation than any other.

- Second, between telling the parable and explaining it, Jesus says something that likely would surprise all of us. He quotes the prophet Isaiah to explain why he preaches in parables: IN order to avoid easy *repentism*. He isn't there for the looky-loos who hear but don't really listen. If you are not really willing to listen then he doesn't really want people to say they want to be forgiven.
- What he says is, Forgiveness really only works its magic in someone's life when they are ready to be good soil.

Now, I suspect that most of us here today know this parable pretty well. Jesus begins by saying "Pay Attention." Then he tells a story of a farmer who plants seed in four different kinds of soil—three of which turn out to be unreceptive.

- There's hardpack soil that is so compressed the seed really has no chance.
- There's rocky soil where anything that grows has little chance to be productive.
- There's thorn-infested soil where the seed may get a start but ends up being choked out by the heartier weeds growing all around it.
- Then there's good soil—receptive soil. Soil that's ready to produce good crops.

So, here's the thing. This parable seems so obvious we wonder why the disciples are such dunderheads. Why did they have to ask him to explain what every it. Why do they not understand what every farmer there has ever been knows for a fact: if you are going to plant a crop, make sure you have good soil or you are wasting your time and money.

But there is more to it than that. Because in telling this story Jesus said something that was so astounding that even the jaws of the farmers listening to him would have fell open in wonder. This is where PAYING ATTENTION comes into play because Jesus was talking to a crowd of mostly farmers and fishermen. And he says that when this sower cast his seed in good soil it grew up and produced a 30- 60- and even a 100-fold crop yield. Then he finished by saying, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen to what I am saying!"

Now folks that kind of crop yield is so staggering that it's beyond any farmer's wildest dreams. It's the same thing as that last story in the Gospel of John where the disciples had been fishing all night with no luck and Jesus tells them to drop their nets where they are right now, and they haul in so many fish that the nets are breaking trying to hold it all. A staggering yield.

Jesus provides no clue to explain any of that miraculous response. Which means he ends the parable with what we used to call a cliff-hanger. "Tune in next week to discover how the hero gets out of this dilemma" Tune in next week to see how this can come to pass! But instead of Jesus just says: "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

That's why his disciples came to him, flashing their backstage passes, and say, "Ah...., Jesus, we're a bit confused. What's the point we supposed to get out of that story? We're not sure *WE* get it." Jesus becomes frustrated. He slaps his forehead in exasperation and says, "If you don't understand what I'm talking about, then how are you going to get any of my parables?" Then he sighs and says, "Look,

The secret of the KINGDOM OF GOD has been *given* to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never

perceiving, and ever hearing...and I don't have to deal with all the problems of easy *repentism* that never turns into real faith."

Okay, he didn't really say that last words. But it's what it meant to quote that saying of Isaiah at this point. Easy *repentism* is not what God is looking for. God is looking for good soil!

And why was he exasperated with them. Because, he said, "*The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.*" The secret of the kingdom of God has planted in you because *you are the good soil*. To people who aren't really good soil, what I really teach will always sound like a riddle. And what makes for being the kind of good soil where the gospel can flourish? Jesus says—the ability to listen, really listen, and then ACT on what you have heard

Early in my ministry, in my first pastorate in Prosser Washington, I had the privilege of being part of a fast-growing congregation. At one point the congregation tripled in size over a period of a year and half. The congregation was elated. News got out. The American Baptist area minister came for a visit to see what we were doing. He attended a class before the worship service and stayed and talked with folk after the service. Before he left, we talked.

He was thrilled to see the growth. But then he told me something that has stuck with me ever since.

"Bob, you have a knack for attracting people that I wish other pastors had. But a word of caution. Just because you can recruit someone to show up doesn't mean you necessarily want them to join up. If you try to be all things for all people, you may end up not being anything for the Lord."

His words proved to be quite true when two years later a small group of the new folk decided that they wanted something different and tried to split the church in half. We survived, but it was an important lesson. Not everyone who comes is ready to be good soil. *Just because someone shows up doesn't mean you necessarily want them to join up.*

And that's what Jesus makes abundantly clear in his explanation of how different kinds of soil lead to crop failure.

- Seed sown on the hardpack pathway has no chance to take root and is gobbled up by the birds. It represents seed where the forces of evil steal it away before it ever has a chance to do its work of growing. This is what happens to seed that faces OPPOSITION. Its message falls on deaf ears.
- Seed sown in rocky ground seems well received—even joyfully received at first—but is unable to take root and fades away at the first signs of trouble or persecution. It never develops sufficient depth of resources to make a commitment to productivity. This is what happens to seed that faces PERSECUTION. Its message falls fearful ears.
- Seed sown amidst thorns is choked out by the competing commitments of want, worry, and wealth and like the seed sown in rocky soil, it never really takes root enough to develop the resources to be productive. Want, worry, and wealth become a competing message of SEDUCTION. Its message falls on self-consumed ears.

- But seed sown in good soil, is able to establish deep roots, becomes fruitfully productive, and accomplishes everything the sower hopes for. This is what happens to seed that experiences PRODUCTIVITY. Its message is well-received by those who had ears to hear.

“Riddle me this, riddle me that; just who is that big black bat?” Okay, that’s the joker from the original television series back in the mid 1960s. The Joker was always teasing Batman with riddles that the Dark Knight had to solve in time to foil the crime, remember? But my point here is that Jesus’ riddles, his parables, were just a different kind of way to tell the truth much like the poet Emily Dickenson described it in her poem:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant.
 Success in Circuit lies.
 Too bright for our infirm Delight the truth’s superb surprises.
 As lightening to the Children eased with explanation kind,
 The truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind.

So, Jesus told his followers the most important SECRET OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD—but he told it to them slant, in seeming riddles. But his parable of the four soils has ONE BIG TRUTH and ONE MIRACULOUS PROMISE all in the same bottle.

- Here is what a Christians need to do: Be good soil.
- Here is the miracle of what God can do with Christians who are good soil: God can do the kingdom-Come.

Imagine that. Really. Imagine that.

I think our closing hymn captures our calling beautifully. It is a Kingdom Come prayer sung by followers of Jesus who have learned to have ears to hear:

Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your word.
 Lord, let my heart be good soil, where love can grow and peace is understood.
 When my heart is hard, break the stone away.
 When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.
 When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.
 Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart be good soil. Amen.