

Sexagesima

4 February, Anno Domini 2024

St. Luke 8:4-15

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

Hearers of the Word,

The Scriptures are truly powerful. They are living and active. They are the power of God for salvation. They have the power to kill eternally and raise to eternal life; the power to cause the deepest terror and bring the greatest comfort. But the Scriptures aren't magical. They aren't like the fairytale book of spells that require the mere incantation of the sounds in order to change someone into a frog. There is no power in their sheer presence in the room, like some kind of radiating energy that will bless you if you get close enough. Nor is it as some claim of the Koran that if you hear it in the original language, even though you understand nothing of what you hear, the sheer beauty of the text will convert anyone who hears it.

Thanks be to God, the Scriptures make no such fanciful claims. Part of their beauty is their simplicity. There are no secret decoder rings or rituals needed to unlock them. There is no secret Gnostic knowledge a person must have or an advanced degree. They are the plain speaking of God to all people. The words are there for all of us to read. God's Word has been translated into most of the known languages of the earth. Though making use of the various different genres of literature - history, parables, story, poetry, etc. - which, in itself is extraordinary, the

Scriptures are the living Word of the living God telling us who He is, what He has commanded us, and what He has done to save us. And while that Word is living and active and efficacious apart from man, it only benefits man when man hears and believes that Word (not some version of that Word). Think of Scripture as God's answer to the demonic question "Did God really say?" If it is necessary for salvation then God said it and it is preserved for us in Holy Writ and we may believe it with absolute certainty. Language was invented for this very purpose - so that man and God could speak to one another and engage in holy conversation. This is chiefly why knowing the rules of language and grammar is so important - so that you can read and understand God's Word to you!

But it isn't our job to figure out Scripture. Rather we are to hear it with attentive hearts and minds, to believe it, to ruminate on it, to pray in light of it, and live according to it. The rub comes in our hearing of that Word. This is the warning Jesus issues. The seed remains the same wherever it falls. There aren't different seeds for different soils. The one seed is cast everywhere. There is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all.

But, how is that Word received? The most orthodox and convincing and winsome sermon in the world can be preached (Jesus' sermons, for example) and still be rejected. What's the problem? It must be the sower's fault. He wasn't dynamic enough. Maybe the preacher should have been more careful where he cast the precious seed? Perhaps the Word was defective or needed to be changed and updated for the different hearers? We just aren't telling the right group of folks. Or maybe we need to study our demographics more carefully and find out

what doctrines and teachings make the hearers uncomfortable or don't make sense and then avoid those.

Pray to God that He doesn't do demographic studies before proclaiming the Gospel! How gracious is the sower who has good seed, seed that brings forth life and salvation, and who casts that seed into every nook and cranny and on to every kind of soil. God doesn't discriminate because He desires that everyone be saved, not just the "right" people. One thing we can be sure of - if there is no seed, there isn't the slightest chance of a harvest. "Faith comes by hearing..." St. Paul writes. "How can they believe if they don't hear?" Faith requires an object. If there is no promise, then there is nothing for faith to grasp hold of. And so, the Word is preached - everywhere and to everyone of every language and action and age that all may hear of the salvation Christ has won for them. And equally as important, it must be heard - properly.

And because God is a gracious sower, you too have heard, indeed, you are hearing. Praise be to God! This day and whenever the Word of God is preached, taught, shared, or read, in the midst of the congregation, around the dinner table, at the hospital bed, at your coworker's desk, over the fence you share with your neighbor, by the dim light of your bedside lamp, the seed of God is being sown. The Holy Spirit is setting to work to carry out God's will. And of that Word God makes this promise "It will accomplish exactly the purpose for which I send it." We just proclaim it. The purpose is God's. This is my comfort standing here in this pulpit and it should be your confidence - the Word is not mine, it is the Word of the Lord which endures forever. And God's Word never returns to Him void.

“But, Pastor, I just don’t feel like I really got anything out of the sermon.” Repent. I can assure you that the problem isn’t in the Word. The problem is in the hearing of the Word. The seed wasn’t the problem in the parable. The pure Word of God never is. We with our sinful ears are the problem. Our lackluster response to the voice of our heavenly Father is not His fault. Perhaps we have allowed our hearts to grow cold to the voice of God. If the knowledge of our sins is nothing more than factual and we aren’t roused to repentance and confession, if we take no joy or comfort in those most precious of Words “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” and we don’t desire what was given and shed above all else, then we have become like the rock-hard path, unaffected by the Word, callous to being saved from death and damnation, and easily deceived. We allow Satan and his teachers to come and steal the saving Word from out of our ears and it bears no fruit. And in such soil there cannot be saving faith.

Or perhaps we do take solace in the Word - when life is good, when there is no temptation, no persecution or crosses, when no sacrifice is required of us. “Ah, yes, God is good! Something wonderful just happened to me! I was spared. The test came back negative. I got a bonus. I feel better.” But that’s not good hearing either. Good days, comfortable days, days free of pain and suffering in this world aren’t what God has promised. We can pray for these things and give thanks to God for them. But we don’t measure God by them. To believe the word is to reject all false confessions of God and not support them, encourage them, or join them. To confess Christ is to invite the blistering heat of Satan’s attacks along with the rejection of the unbelieving world and the fierce resistance of even your own flesh and mind. They all hate the Word wherever it is found. They can’t stand to hear it and they will stop

at nothing to silence anyone who dares to speak it, believe it, and confess it. If faith does not take root and deepen, and if it is not constantly, daily nourished, then it will wither and die under the pressure.

The Word will also find no home in your heart if your heart and mind are too filled with the cares and riches and pleasures of the world. Our Lord didn't say, "Seek first what makes you happy, what is fun, what makes you financially secure and then, if you've time and energy, seek after forgiveness and righteousness and the things of God's kingdom." First the things of God's kingdom. Then, as you have need of them, God will add all the others to you. The world will throw your way endless amounts of distractions and obligations and pleasures and entertainment and things to worry about all with the single intent of choking out the Word which you have heard. "Sure, God said. But don't forget (fill in the blank)." Don't be deceived. Don't blindly eat whatever the world offers. The world is not your friend and it doesn't have your interests in mind. It is seeking to be distracted from the truth and to distract you from the truth. What it cares about and finds important aren't things that you should. What is important to the world is its war against God. All that it does is driven to that end. The world, as Scripture clearly tells us, lives for nothing more than its passions that are always and only contrary to the clear will and Word of God. You only need to watch television for a few minutes to figure that out. Its god is its belly and it wants you to join in its idolatry. The more perverted, the more violent, the more immoral, the more anti-Christian, the better. And if our heart is busy chasing after worldly, fleshly wealth and pleasure because we're afraid of missing out or being thought strange, then whatever of God's Word we hear will be swallowed up and

lost and be of no benefit to us and the faith that once sprang up will be choked out and die.

And, to be sure, the Word of God is also a death sentence for our Old Adam with all of his selfish, self-serving desires. He will resist. But pride and vanity and arrogance are wholly incompatible with faith in the Word of God. The Word always lays siege to the fortress of self and will not be satisfied until it is razed to the ground. Do not delude yourself by imagining that the Lord will tolerate sharing the devotion of your heart with the idol of you. One, and only one must reign. Not your job. Not your looks. Not your health. Not your social card. Not your Facebook friends list. The Gospel sounds wonderful until it means that you are dethroned from being the center of the universe and you will have to suffer for it.

We need to take seriously the warning Jesus speaks. Hearts that were once fertile soil can still grow hard and lose all the benefits of the seed. Faith that was once rooted deep and bringing forth abundant fruit can wither and die when our ears become plugged up with indifference and callousness and pride. And this will most certainly happen if we are not hearing the Word. Water left in the watering can can't benefit the plant in the pot. Medicine can't help if it is just sitting in the bottle. It needs to be taken. We need to be constant and active hearers of what God has spoken. Because it is by His Word that God has promised to preserve us in the true faith and protect us from Satan's insidious attacks.

The great joy is that the seed of God's Word, because it is the living voice of God Himself, is able to transform even the most inhospitable stone into rich fertile soil yielding a hundred-fold harvest. Churned

under by the Law, hardened hearts are softened and brought to repentance and the Gospel of forgiveness brings forth the glorious fruit of faith in the cross of Jesus Christ. The promise of Holy Baptism is a never ending stream of life and peace and those promises are ours to hear and treasure ever day. And to you, in your hearing, the Lord Jesus speaks the words of Holy Absolution that in the midst of darkness and despair, there might be light and hope.

May our Lord grant that our hearts never grow cold to the voice of Christ speaking across the ages, inviting us to eat and drink His very Body and Blood, hidden under bread and wine, that we might have a share in the fruits of Calvary's cross. The faith born and nurtured and strengthened by these words brings forth the fruits of love and truly good, pious, God-pleasing works. Thus the sower sows and the Lord causes His Word to be proclaimed to all the ends of the earth, to you, that He may make you into good soil, rich in faith and bringing forth the good works of love and mercy which He has prepared in advance for you. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep you hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.