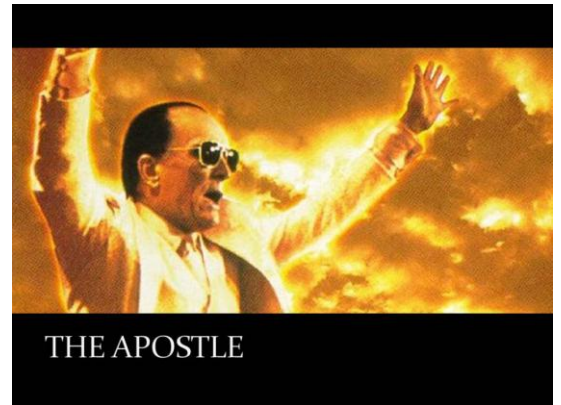


“Seeing is Not Believing”

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10 July 2011 + Crosspoint Presbyterian Church
Matthew 13:1-3a, 10-13, 18-23 + the parable of the sower

Sonny Dewey never stops talking. “Praise the Lord” and “Thank you Jesus” punctuates almost every other line he speaks. He is almost constantly in prayer. He looks to be every inch the capable and successful pastor of a large and growing congregation. Sonny Dewey is the Pentecostal minister portrayed by Robert Duvall in the movie *The Apostle*.



Sonny Dewey would strike you for all the world like someone who carefully and prayerfully listens to God. He has a happy life, a good congregation, a beautiful wife. What more could you want? What could possibly happen?

Sonny Dewey is a successful pastor, yet a womanizer. Sonny has a big problem with anger. One wonders if he’s talking to God all the time but not actually listening. It looks like the line is clear but the signal is just not getting through.

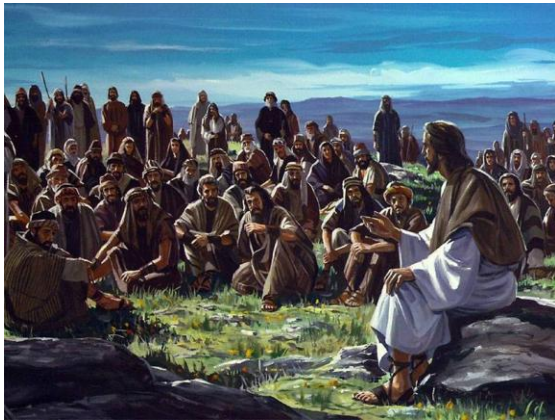
He may be an example of what Jesus says about the crowds of followers: **“hearing but they do not listen.”** Sonny strikes the youth pastor with a baseball bat right in the middle of a church baseball game. Now I have said that church league baseball can be really vicious, but this is absurd.

Like Jacob of old, he skips town right ahead of the law. The young man dies soon after the attack. Sonny is a murderer. All this and he is still talking at God all the time. But one must ask, is he listening? Jesus is right of course: “hearing is not necessarily listening.” And...

Seeing is not necessarily believing. Yes there is that old adage “seeing is believing” but is it really true? Not apparently in the

context of today's text.

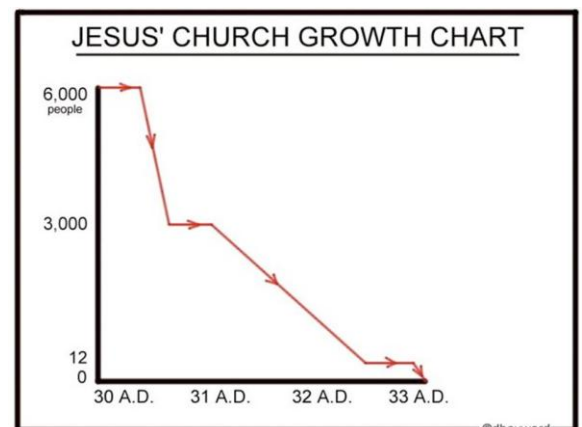
Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" [Matthew 13:10-13]



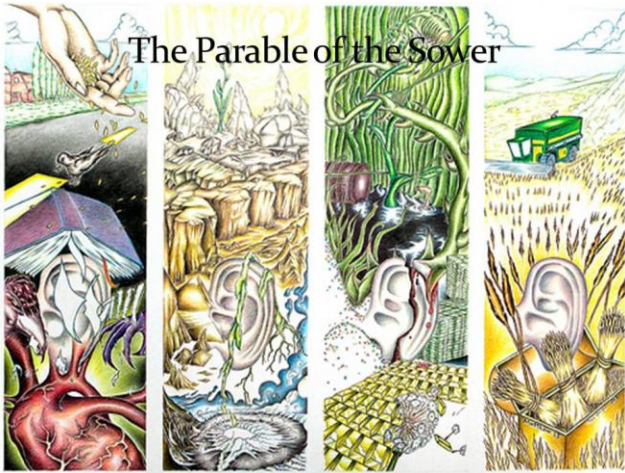
A lot of people have witnessed Jesus healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, raising Lazarus from the dead, feeding the multitudes and changing water into wine. Even larger groups have heard Jesus teaching God's plan – five thousand at one setting and perhaps even more heard the Sermon on the Mount. Yet after it is all said and done, only a handful actually believe. Only a tiny

portion translate what they've seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears into actual faith in the living God.

Jesus is so right in quoting the great prophet Isaiah: "*seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.*" If anyone can see the awesome power of God first hand and yet fails to respond, then seeing is not believing. Instead it is much more like us to say about what we see Jesus doing: "I cannot believe my eyes, so I won't!"



Even the most dedicated can miss the mark. Even careful preachers and devoted Bible teachers can miss the mark. Jesus was right when he said "*seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.*"



The Parable of the Sower

Another preacher recently delivered a sermon supposedly based upon the parable of the sower, our text today. The preacher said that our call as followers of Jesus is to be the sowers of the seed of the Gospel. So far this would seem not to necessarily follow the parable but to follow *from* it. The preacher proceeded to give a gardening lesson and in it to chastise

the congregation for not being able sowers of the Gospel. We should first cultivate the soil by patiently working the soil, weeding it and applying fertilizer. Then noting that seed packets have expiration dates, the preacher proceeds to castigate the congregation for being guilty of using old, outmoded ways of being church.¹

Now these may all be true, but this approach diverges rather significantly from Jesus' parable.

- First of all, who is the sower? Who is the actor in our drama? God is the sower! God is the one doing the action.²



This is a story Jesus tells about God first and foremost~ about how God acts. God is the one who is indiscriminate in the sowing of the seed. We on the other hand don't sow seeds like that. The sermon is right about one thing – we human farmers must give a great deal of attention to the tilling of the ground, for fertilizer and weeding. But that's not how God does it. God works differently. This is not how God wants us to spread the kingdom. If we want to be part of God's great story, do we sow the kingdom only in those places we deem as the most likely to produce? Or do we do it God's way, 'casting our bread on the water' so to speak.

So are we really supposed to be 'agricultural extension agents' in our evangelism the way the preacher lays it out in that sermon?



Are we to be so very careful about where we put the seed? Do all kinds of 'soil tests' ahead of time? Only spread the Gospel among the one's we figure are the most receptive?

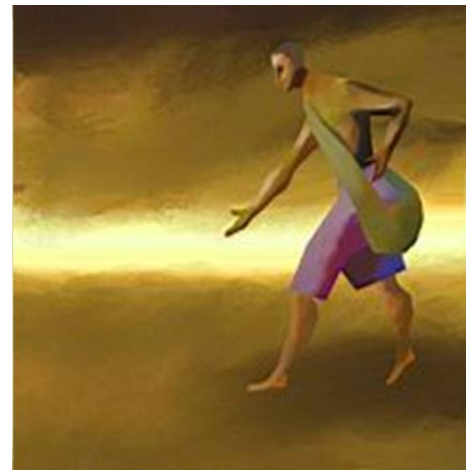
Jesus in this parable is definite – we are to spread the Gospel without discrimination. We are to share God's Word far and wide and to throw the seed everywhere without being overly

analytic. We are not to say "Well, that doesn't look like fertile ground. I'm not putting any of my precious seed there." If we only looked for the most fertile ground, the Gospel would likely never have spread beyond Palestine. Over and over we have seen the supposed least fertile ground in our human judgment is where the seed has borne the greatest harvest. Think of a few examples if you will.

- Second, according to Jesus the seed is the reign of God, the holy Gospel. Does any preacher really want to say that seed ever expires? I think not!³

We have all heard sermons like the one I have just described. A lot of preachers do this. I have been known to do this on occasion. We have all heard good and memorable sermons along these lines. Some may have even fed our faith. There is nothing wrong with these ideas in themselves.

However, we must recognize that these points in the sermon, as good as they may be, do not emerge organically from the parable but rather follow the preacher's own ideas. The preacher is not actually 'listening' to the text itself but rather using the text as a pretext.



So again we are back to: *“seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”* This is so hard! Trying to come to Scripture and let God speak to us! We know when we come to Scripture it is better to listen and perceive, that is, wait for God’s meaning; better that than to fill Scripture with our own human desires for meaning. We know that, but to listen, really listen, to perceive, really perceive, these are the most difficult – and the most needed!

Listening. How do we listen with integrity for God’s Word? How is it we often hear but fail to listen? Isn’t listening just hearing something.



Red Owl, a Cherokee storyteller can help us here. He has observed that whites commonly don’t dialogue, rather we routinely talk past each other. He is right. We can do this with God as well. He says when he is home on his reservation in Georgia, there is a strong culture of listening. The people there don’t talk over each other. They listen carefully without letting their minds run to how they are going to

respond. They pause and process. Then and only then they respond.

Red Owl’s grandmother says this in a marvelous way: “Why do you think the creator gave Grandmother two ears and two eyes but only one mouth?” Why do you think? “Because there is more medicine in understanding than in being understood.”

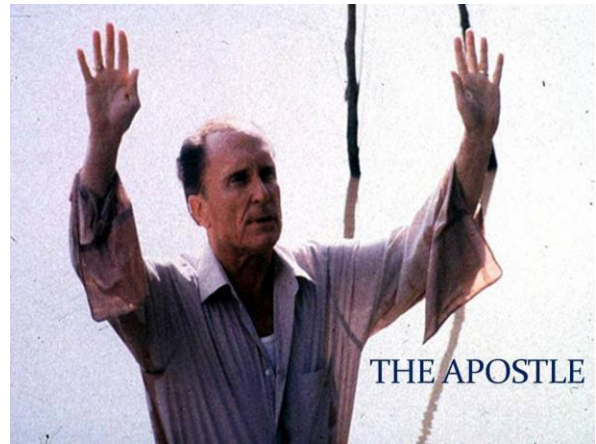
So true. A wise woman indeed!

Here then is a solution to Jesus’ paradox: *“seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen.”* With God there is more medicine in understanding than in thinking we can make ourselves understood. God indeed already knows us anyway – God already knows us so much better than we know ourselves. In our walk with the LORD

there is more medicine in listening than there is in all our clever explanations and interpretations of God's words.

That is why we start our worship with praise and self-examination. As I say, "being honest with God and ourselves." God already knows us, knows everything about us, everything we have done for the good and also what we have done which diminishes us. So why do we say "honest with God and ourselves" since he is already more than aware. The question is not God's awareness of us but our awareness of God! As usual we get everything backwards. God is not asking us "have you seen?" but "have you perceived?" Not "have you heard?" but "have you listened?" God gave us two eyes, two ears but only one mouth for a solid reason.

Sonny Dewey on the lam baptizes himself in a stagnant river – rechristens himself the "Apostle E.F." Newly reborn he tries to start a new life and eventually a new congregation. He begins to talk less and listen more to God and others, and slowly he begins to experience a transformation in his life. He begins to lose his anger. God grants him a kind of second sight. He knows things before they happen.



Even Sonny Dewey this weak and broken vessel can be molded and used by God. God utilizes him to build a new congregation, this time build on a firm foundation with spiritual integrity. He touches souls with healing power. God uses Sonny to turn a bad attack in worship into a conversion.

Sonny knows precisely when the police will arrive to arrest him. He surrenders meek and mild. His life has been truly transformed by the power of the Spirit.

If God can do this with a murderer, maybe God can do something like this with us, even us. What must we do to be truly receptive of

God? Let us perceive and not just see – listen and not just hear. Then the disciples' blessing will be ours as well:

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.” [Matthew 13:16]

¹ William H. Willimon *Pulpit Resource* July 13, 2008, p12

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*