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Sermon 30 AUG 2020

JSW 4: Jesus Says WHAT About Parables?

- AUDIO: (announcer) It's time to gather your friends and family, get out your Bibles and your sermon notes, and open your hearts and minds, because this is another Sunday sermon in a series called "and then, Jesus says what?"
- Good morning, good morning. We are so thankful that you have joined us today—in whatever time and in whatever place it is that you're joining us—we hope that you'll commit to having "church at home" with us in this virtual space--and make an effort to gather with friends or with family as you are able, and we know that the Spirit will be present with us all, binding us together in the love of God. I believe that God has something profound and life-changing to say to each of us today if we have ears to hear.
- You know as I was writing this sermon, what my ears heard several times this week was a car alarm. You may know that our flat looks out at the ferry and cars line up to go over to Millport, and every so often someone will have left their car parked in the queue and walked up to get their ticket--and something happens--I don't know what it is--maybe somebody walks too close to the car or a gust of wind blows really hard or maybe a seagull lands on it--but something happens to make that car's alarm go off.

- Now those alarms are designed to alert the driver of that car, and others who may be in the area, that someone is trying to steal that car, or to break into it and steal what's inside.
- But nobody thinks that when they hear a car alarm. They think--"would you turn off that infernal racket!" Because we know there's no theft going on--and it turns out that most of the time we're right--research shows that 95 to 99% of the times that a car alarm disturbs everybody in the neighbourhood, it's just a false alarm.
- Now I had never thought about it, but I read about it this week--it turns out that there's a whole field of research into human behaviour in response to alarms. And it's an important field of research because some alarms, unlike most car alarms that you hear--are an attempt to communicate an important message to the people who hear them--messages like "there's a tornado on the way" or "there's been some unauthorised entry" or "there's a fire in the building."
- And the research into fire alarms is fascinating, because they're really important--people's lives are at risk and every second counts when a building is on fire.
- What you want in a fire alarm is something that communicates clearly what the situation is, and directs people to respond appropriately.
- And so these researchers look into what kind of sound a fire alarm ought to have--should it be a bell or a buzzer or a siren--and should there be a voice that tells people what to do--and what about people who can't hear--should there be a flashing light

- But whatever the fire alarm sounds like, researchers have shown that there is a period of time when folks hear the alarm and think "what is this? Is that a fire alarm, a burglar alarm? What does this mean?" And even when they conclude that it's a fire alarm, they're likely to think--that is, the meaning that they interpret is "it's a false alarm--we need to make the alarm stop" and NOT "there is a fire, we need to get out of the building."
- And their response to the alarm differs according to what they're doing, as well. People in a theatre watching a movie respond differently when they hear a fire alarm compared to people who are relaxing by the pool at a hotel on holiday or from a person who is sitting at their office desk at work writing an email to a client, and all of them respond differently from a person who is in bed asleep and is awakened by an alarm.
- But in every case there are those who completely miss the point of the alarm--who resist its meaning--and there are those who have ears to hear and understand, those who know what it means and who respond, who tell others what's going on and who lead them to safety and rescue from the flames.
- That's a pretty good sermon right there, I reckon I could just stop at this point and wrap up, but we're just getting started.
- Today is the fourth Sunday--can you believe that we're halfway through this series--seems like time just passes by so quickly these days--but this is the FOURTH Sunday in our sermon series called "and then. . . Jesus says WHAT?"
- and tonight is the first of our SECOND HELPING Bible studies--so be sure to join us at 6:00 on Zoom as we dig deeper into what we're looking at this morning

- For the last few weeks we have been looking at, and thinking about, and studying together, some of the more difficult statements that are ascribed to Jesus in the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John--things that Jesus says that can be a bit confusing, or easy to misinterpret
- And as we said last week this series is NOT simply about providing the answers to “what does this mean” or “what’s the correct interpretation” of these statements—it’s also about considering HOW we read the Bible, and what we do when we find things in the Bible—even words that come straight from the mouth of Jesus-- that might not be easy to understand, things that are not obvious or straightforward, but challenging—even difficult.
- And we began on August 9th by looking at Chapter 10 of Matthew’s gospel, and the title of that sermon was “Jesus says WHAT about peace?” because we saw that as Jesus talks with his disciples, he says: I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
- And as we looked at what that meant, we considered the way that Jesus speaks prophetically--in the tradition of the prophets--and we'll see that again today-- and we saw how the words of the prophet are met with division and conflict and sometimes with rejection and even persecution and execution--and we saw how Jesus was preparing his disciples to experience that kind of reaction when they followed his example
- And then the next week we looked at chapter 14 of Luke’s gospel, and our sermon was called “Jesus says WHAT about parents?” and we learned about the Greek word "*miseo*" and we saw that even though the idea of hating your parents

and family and your life sounds extreme, even shocking, it was part of the way that Jesus was telling the crowds who listened to him that there was a difference—a BIG difference—between being a FOLLOWER of Jesus and someone who is just tagging along to watch the show. Being a follower of Jesus means saying “I’d rather have Jesus than anything”—even family, life, and possessions

- And then last week our sermon was titled "Jesus says WHAT about the Poor" because we looked at John's gospel, where Jesus says "you'll always have the poor with you," and we looked at what that statement means and what it doesn't mean, and we saw that Jesus was alluding to the Torah--the book of Deuteronomy--but we also looked at the contrast between the way that Judas and Mary respond to Jesus presence--Judas, from his critical perspective of scarcity and greed and hypocrisy, and Mary as a true disciple--showing extravagant, sacrificial love and an absolute trust in God's provision that is met with the transforming grace of Jesus
- So we've asked the question "Jesus says WHAT" about peace, about parents and about the poor--and continuing with that alliterative theme, the title of today's sermon is "Jesus says WHAT --about parables."
- Now we all know what a parable is--or we probably think we do--parables are these short narratives, these brief stories that Jesus tells in the gospels, --well, in the synoptic gospels anyway, in Matthew, Mark and Luke--there's some scholarly disagreement about whether Jesus speaks in parables in the gospel of John--but parables are stories about real life--people and things in the world

around us, usually giving an illustration of what the Kingdom of God is like, or what it means to be a follower of Jesus, for instance

- The word "parable" comes from the Greek "*parabole*"--and literally means "throwing alongside"--because there are two Greek words there--*para*--that means alongside or beside--like parallel, or paramedic, or parasite--and the other word is "*ballo*"--and that means to throw--think of the words "ballistic" or even just the word "ball."
- So para-ballo is to throw alongside, and a parable is a throwing or placing alongside--so when we say "the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed; the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field; the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle his accounts"-- parables throw one thing alongside another--*para-ballo*, to throw alongside--hang onto that thought for just a bit, because you're going to hear it again
- Now this parable that we heard Pastor Tasha read from the Gospel of Mark chapter 4, it's also found in the gospel of Luke, in chapter 8, and in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 13.
- And this parable, the parable of the sower, is sometimes called the KEY to the parables--and that makes sense because Jesus asks his disciples how will you understand ANY parable unless you understand THIS ONE?
- The parable of the sower is a parable about parables
- To begin to understand what that might mean, let's look at what's going on here in the 4th chapter of Mark, beginning with verse 1--and we'll get to the "Jesus says what" passage in just a bit

- Now, by the time we get to chapter 4 of Mark's gospel, John the Baptist has proclaimed that Jesus is coming--remember that's where Mark starts--he doesn't give us all the Christmas story and background details that Matthew and Luke do--and Jesus has been baptised, and tempted in the wilderness; he's called his disciples, healed quite a few people and has preached and cast out demons in Galilee and elsewhere, he's already had some run-ins with the religious authorities, who accused him of being possessed, he's given the disciples authority to proclaim his message and cast out demons, and he's developed quite a following among people in general--the *hoi polloi*, to use a term we used a few weeks ago. And as we also heard a few weeks ago, here we find Jesus drawing such a crowd as he teaches along the beach, that he gets into a boat with the crowd still on the shore. and then Mark tells us that he taught them many things in parables--so this parable that's coming up isn't the first parable Jesus tells, but it is the first one that Mark shares with us as we read his gospel.
- And Mark tells us that in his teaching, Jesus said this: He says "Listen!" The Greek there is Ἀκούετε, from the root *akouó*--that's where we get the word acoustics, and if you speak French, you'll recognise the similarity to *écouter*, to listen
- So notice here Jesus is giving the crowd a command: Listen up! we might say in English. The Greek also means to comprehend, to understand what is heard. Keep this in mind.
- Now the parable Jesus tells begins like this: a sower went out to sow.
- Now here's where I wish you could see me and not just hear me, but I want you to think about what this looks like. This is a person who is sowing seeds while

they walk along a path. And they are broadcasting these seeds, not plowing up a field making a hole in the tilled soil and putting a seed in that hole, but they're carrying a bag or a basket with seeds in it--it's probably got a strap that goes over their shoulder, the bag is probably on their left side, at their hip, and, now imagine this with me--you might even want to make this motion with me--the sower takes their right hand and grabs a handful of seed from the bag on their left side, and then in a sweeping motion scatters the seeds in one direction or another.

- Are you with me? Can you see it? Are you making that motion?
- So what is a sower? A sower is one who takes seeds and throws them out alongside the path they're walking--to sow seed is to throw it alongside, and to throw alongside in Greek is what? Para-ballo, to throw alongside--a sower is one who para-ballo, the sower is here para-ballo-ing--para-ballo, the two words which together give us the word parable--oh, that Jesus was clever wasn't he? And Jesus tells this parable as he floats alongside the crowd and spreads the word among them.
- And so this is a parable about parables.
- Now as this sower sows seed, some of his seed falls on the path and the birds eat it, and some falls on rocky ground, where it shot up quickly but dies when the sun hits it because it didn't have a good root system; still other seed fell into thorns that choked it; but some seed, some seed fell on good soil, and it grew and produced 30 and 60 and 100 times as many seeds as it took to grow the plant.



- Now I can relate to this because a few years ago I decided we were gonna grow Bradford watermelons--they are the sweetest most delicious melons you have ever tasted, and they were thought to have been extinct, but South Carolina's own Nat Bradford had brought them back on his family's farm and he was selling his seeds to raise money for places that didn't have clean water--he called it "Watermelons for Water" and he was selling his seeds for 1 dollar each. And I bought 50. For 50 dollars. And some people thought I was crazy for paying a dollar apiece for watermelon seeds---Until they tasted a Bradford watermelon, and then they wanted one. And I gave many a melon away to folks who asked for them--and I'd tell people, now you keep some seeds for yourself, but I want you to give some back to me. And they did, and do you know when the growing season was over, I had more than the 50 seeds I started with--in fact I had so many seeds I stopped counting them at 2000.
- "Who's crazy now?" I said---Seeds that find good soil and bear fruit have a way of increasing exponentially.
- And then Jesus ends the parable by saying "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!" And both "to hear," and "listen" there in verse 9 have the same root, *akouó*, as the word Jesus uses when he commands the crowd to "listen" before he tells the parable.
- Now here at verse 10, things really get interesting. And this is where some folks get confused.
- Mark tells us that "When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables."

- When he was alone--ok, he's alone, got it--
- those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.
- But he was alone. But not really alone, since the 12 disciples were with him, and so were other people. How many? Mark doesn't say. So alone really means away from the crowds that he was with earlier. But some have stayed around. They have remained. They've followed him back to wherever he and the disciples have gone. Who is there? Mark doesn't say.
- But what Mark does say is that Jesus tells them: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables"
- Ok so these are insiders, because Jesus distinguishes them from those outside, and they have been "given the secret of the Kingdom of God."
- This sounds like they have insider information--they somehow know some truth--they have some knowledge, some GNOSIS as it would have been known then, that folks outside, those outsiders, don't have access to. It SOUNDS LIKE that's the situation here. But let's reserve judgement for a bit.
- Jesus says, Isaiah 6:
- And there's our "Jesus says WHAT" statement for this week.
- Because it sounds like--and you might be tempted to think that-- what Jesus is saying here is that you insiders have the secret understanding about the kingdom, but I speak in parables to the outsiders IN ORDER THAT they don't understand--that is--you might think there's something deceptive about the

parables that keeps the outsiders out, while those on the inside get the explanation, the straight truth.

- Now the word that means "in order that," here is *hina*--and both Mark and Luke use it, while Matthew uses the word "*hoti*" which means "because." In Matthew Jesus says he speaks in parables BECAUSE seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand
- We'll talk more about this at the Bible study tonight, and there are some interesting differences, but in all three gospels,
- Jesus is repeating the words the prophet Isaiah, and in Isaiah 6 after Isaiah's lips have been touched with a live coal and Isaiah hears the Lord saying "Whom shall I send?" he answers "Here I am, send me!" and then the Lord tells him to say to the people "Keep listening but do not comprehend, Keep looking but do not understand" until all is wasteland, until nothing remains but the "holy seed."
- The holy seed. It's right there in Isaiah 6:13.
- And so Jesus speaks in parables IN ORDER THAT these prophetic words are fulfilled.
- And here Jesus fulfills this scripture when he speaks the word to those whose hearts and minds are rocky ground and thorny places, when he throws the seed of the Word alongside his path and even though three out of four seeds yield nothing, the one seed that finds good soil yields 30 and 60 and 100 fold.
- You'll remember that a couple of weeks ago we talked about the way that folks respond to the prophetic voice--to the prophet who raises the alarm about God's

judgment and calls for repentance--it brings not peace but a sword--division and conflict--

- Jesus, like Isaiah, brings the word of the Lord to those who do not accept it--who will reject it, and him, and his invitation to follow him
- But that's not everybody
- And this is also why Jesus speaks in parables--so that the ones with ears to hear, the ones who obey when he cries LISTEN! may receive the seed that is the word and may bear fruit. So that the ones who have ears to hear may hear and understand
- But also IN ORDER THAT the ones who will will reject the word, in whom the word withers, in whom the word is choked--IN ORDER THAT that they also might listen but not hear, might see but not understand
- So does this "IN ORDER THAT they won't understand" mean that Jesus is being deceptive?
- Not at all--notice that in the parable, the seed that falls on rocky ground is the SAME as the seed that falls on good soil.
- The difference is NOT the seed--the difference is the soil.
- And what makes the difference in the soil?
- The difference between having ears to hear and ears that hear but do not understand is an openness to receive the gift of faith.
- It's not some special knowledge or understanding that folks have or don't have already, it's just a readiness to accept God's prevenient grace . It's a willingness to respond to the word and follow Jesus.

- It's a willingness to stop thinking that the alarm we hear is just noise and an openness to respond to the message it's communicating. That's what having ears to hear is all about.
- But what about that "secret" of the Kingdom that Jesus talked about?
- Jesus tells those who are with him after the crowds have gone that they have been given the "secret" of the kingdom of God
- Now we said before that this sounds like they have some insider knowledge or special ability to understand that those on the outside don't have--but notice that Jesus STILL has to explain his parable to them--they DON'T understand it on their own--they don't seem to have some special understanding, some special knowledge, some "SECRET" that the outsiders don't have--so why does Jesus say that the secret of the Kingdom has been given to them?
- The word that is translated "secret" here is *mustérion* and it refers to a mystery or a secret which has been hidden but is revealed by God's grace
- And the difference between those who are with Jesus when he says "to you has been given the secret" and those who have gone away is obvious when you think about it
- What they have that those who have gone away do not have-- is Jesus. What's the secret that has been given to them, what's the mystery of the kingdom of God? It's Jesus.
- And even though Mark tells us down in verse 33 that Jesus explains THIS parable AND the other parables to his disciples, we also see that even when Jesus calms the storm around verse 35, the disciples are still afraid, they still have no faith--

they still wonder "who is this?" And throughout the gospel, Jesus' disciples do not fully understand who he is.

- But they continue to stay with him--they continue to follow--even though they won't even BEGIN to understand the mystery of the Kingdom of God until after the crucifixion and resurrection, after the whole story has been told--still they follow him--still they let him lead. They do not refuse or reject the Word but they are receptive and in time they will bear fruit--30 and 60 and 100 fold.
- The parables of Jesus are an invitation to follow him--an invitation to respond--an opportunity to offer a response and to share the word that has been shared with us--be a part of the story--
- And as we think about the parable of the sower this morning I want to suggest that to follow the sower is to become a sower-- Jesus calls us to be like him--to follow his example and share the word with others even though the majority of the seeds we sow may not find good soil--even though 3 out of 4 don't bear fruit, the ones that do bear 30 and 60 and 100x
- Do we have ears to hear this morning? Can we hear and understand--can we see and perceive--are we willing to follow the one who calls us to bear fruit?
- May the Lord give us opportunities to sow the seed of the gospel this week, to share the good news of rescue and restoration, to lead others to safety.
- I hope you'll join us tonight at 6:00. We have a lot to talk about and I think it's going to be a wonderful time to gather together in the Word.
- May God bless you today and everyday.