

## “The One Who Hears the Word and Understands”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Richard C. Allen

July 13, 2008

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

There is an old, fictional story about a preacher who arrived in the new parish, met all the people, and got up in the pulpit to offer the first sermon. This preacher chose a text like the one that says... ‘and love your neighbor as yourself.’ It was a fine sermon, well illustrated, applauded by young and old alike. The head deacon even commented that it had been a fine sermon. On the second Sunday of this preacher’s tenure, the exact same sermon was offered. People smiled graciously; assumed the new minister hadn’t had time to craft a new sermon because of all the details of settling in. Again, the deacon complimented the preacher on a fine delivery. However, when, on the third consecutive Sunday, the congregation heard the same exposition on ‘love your neighbor as yourself,’ the deacon took the preacher aside and confronted him lovingly, ‘haven’t you got something else?’ To which the new preacher replied, “When there’s evidence that everyone in the congregation has understood what it means to love the neighbor, then I’ll move to the next topic!” Though it’s just a fictional story, it does help us get into Matthew’s mindset as he writes down and includes the parables of Jesus in his Gospel.

For Matthew, there is this wild expectation that hearing and understanding the Word of God will be more than an intellectual exercise; that it will lead to visible changes in attitude and conduct. When the Word is understood, it is internalized and integrated into the life of the believer. When the Word is understood, a difference is observable, like the difference that is realized when a seed falls into fertile soil. This is what the Parable of the Sower is all about...

the difference it makes when the Word of God is received with understanding, when the Word grabs a hold of a person such that that person appears to have experienced a birth. Your best friend is heard to say, ‘I wonder what’s come over Margaret? She used to be so judgmental; now she is filled with praise!’

In early May, as you know, I traveled to Malawi, Central Africa, to visit my Peace Corps school and to re-connect with the villagers there. I had determined to speak only in Chichewa and to use English as a last resort. One day, I was walking along the perimeter of the school grounds, letting memories flood into my consciousness, when two young men approached me asking if by chance I had ever heard of a man named Jesus Christ. I smiled and said, ‘Ndiri ndi abusa kwa America.’ (I am a pastor of a church in America.) They continued on their way, apparently satisfied with my answer. Matthew, however, would not have been satisfied with that reply. Matthew would have pushed me for evidence that I had received the Gospel with understanding, that there is some evidence of a difference the Gospel has made. So, later in the day, I found myself reflecting on this question, not letting myself off the hook with the easy answer I had offered to the two boys earlier in the day.

And here is my witness to you. For me, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about Resurrection. It is about believing death never gets the last word. It is about approaching every situation with an Easter hope; believing God is able to bring life where there has been only death, believing God is able to bring light where there has been only darkness, believing God can bring joy where there has been only deep sorrow. Whether it’s the story of Mary looking into the empty tomb or the story of Jesus raising Jairus’ daughter or the story of Zacchaeus climbing down from his perch in the sycamore tree, I read the Gospel stories and I understand that in the Kingdom of God there are no dead ends, no dark alleys leading to emptiness, no box canyons with no way out;

in the kingdom of God, there is always a spark to kindle a new flame. I'd like to think that if I live to attend my 50<sup>th</sup> high school reunion in 2015, someone there will say, 'What's gotten into Richard Allen? Isn't he the one we used to count on to speak a discouraging word? Something's got a hold of him!

For Matthew, the Gospel is alive and empowering. Received with understanding, it is like a potter's hands, able to give new shape to a tired mission, new purpose to a tired ministry, new vision to a tired community. Received without understanding, it is like the seed that falls along the path where the soil is hard-packed and unwelcoming. Nothing much comes of it.

Matthew sees that the survival of the church relies on people of faith receiving the Gospel with understanding. In pondering this text, I recalled a moment of terror in my summer of Clinical Pastoral Education. At the Melrose Wakefield Hospital, I was assigned to a certain floor, to meet the patients and to be their chaplain. In the course of a conversation with one older gentleman, he asked, 'Do you believe in the efficacy of prayer?' Remember...I didn't do all that well in English class! The efficacy of prayer....I said, "Yes! Definitely!" And then something happened allowing me a graceful escape from the room and from that awkward moment. I ran to a dictionary! Efficacy: noun meaning effectiveness. The man wanted to know if I thought praying works.

Matthew is passionate about the efficacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When received with understanding, it has the effect of raising the dead to life. It has the effect of transforming a single kernel of maize into a whole bushel of grain. It has the effect of transforming a valley of despair into a mountain of hope.

One way to define the ministry of a local church is to say we are about the business of enabling people of all ages to receive the Gospel with understanding. This is why we have a Scripture-based curriculum. This is why we present the Bible to fourth graders. This is why we have Bible classes for adults on Sunday mornings, Tuesday mornings, and now Monday nights. This is why we encourage our members to participate in some labor of love, some ministry of peace, some activity of justice. This is why we invite people to be in the healing ministry, to be on a visitation team, to be a gleaner, or to pick up the day old bagels and deliver them to Gilmore manor. This is why we invite people to have hands-on experiences of the Gospel through Habitat for Humanity, through Peter's Retreat and through Food Share. One of these days, someone is going to ask you, when you least expect it, 'Is the Gospel efficacious?' and you'll be able to say with authenticity, 'Yes! Definitely! It is effective because I have received it with understanding; I have been the fertile soil.'

The Parable of the Sower may well speak to you quite differently. This is how it was speaking to me this week. And I offer this insight in the greatest of hope! Amen.