

Sexagesima Sunday

St. Luke 8:4-15: "For the Sake of Your Soul: Listen!"

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In Nomine Iesu

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Lord of the harvest, You sow good seed into the hearts of people everywhere: Grant that our hearts may not be so hardened by the world's traffic that the seed can take no root; nor so shallow that the roots can find no depth; nor so cumbered with the cares and riches of the world that the growing shoots are choked; but that we by Your gracious working through the Spirit may be good ground, bearing good fruit; to the glory of Your name. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 52)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the eighth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to [Jesus], He said in a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As He said these things, He called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." / And when His disciples asked Him what this parable meant, He said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' / "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who constantly tends and keeps the field of all believers through His Holy Word, dear fellow redeemed:

Listen to this! The human ear is an amazing creation of God. The outer ear looks kind of funny, but it is specially shaped to funnel sound waves into the ear canal. The sound waves hit the eardrum, which cause it to vibrate. This vibration shakes the three smallest bones in the body which look like a hammer, an anvil, and a stirrup. The stirrup passes these vibrations to the cochlea, a fluid-filled tube that looks like a snail shell. The inside of this tube is covered by more

than 20,000 hair fibers. These hairs convert the vibrations to electrical signals that get passed along nerve channels to the brain.

This is happening right now while you are listening to me talk. And it's happening not just in one ear, which would be amazing enough. But God gave you two ears, which simultaneously receive sound waves and blend them together in your brain, so that you can make sense of the sounds you are hearing.

The mighty God did not form us in a haphazard way like a child might form a person out of play-dough. He made us and all the parts of our body for a purpose. What is that purpose? St. Paul identifies it: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship"* (Rom. 12:1). Our bodies are intended for the Lord's work. And that includes our ears.

"He who has ears to hear," said Jesus, *"let him hear."* What exactly does Jesus want us to hear? He wants us to hear what He is saying. His words matter not just because words convey information. His words are different. His words are powerful. When Jesus speaks, His words produce what He says. His words give life.

This is what He wants us to learn through His parable of the sower and the seed. The sower scattered his seed liberally. He was so generous with the seed that some fell along the path, some on rocks, some among thorns, and some on good ground. This is how God sows His Word. He scatters it all over the world, even in places where it seems unlikely to take root.

In today's Old Testament lesson, God says this about His saving Word: *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it"* (Isa. 55:10-11).

God's Word softens hardened hearts just as rain softens hardened ground. You and I cannot make the ground of our heart good and receptive to hearing God's Word. The Word itself does this by the power of the Holy Spirit. For most of us, God did this work in us at our Baptism. As the water was sprinkled on you and the powerful words of Jesus were spoken, God *"[removed] the heart of stone from your flesh and [gave] you a heart of flesh"* (Eze. 36:26). Through His Word, He planted faith in your heart, and through His Word, He continues to nourish and grow your faith.

This is something like the settlers who first cleared the land for planting crops. They had to break through the thick sod, chop down trees, and dig out roots and rocks before they could plant the seed. The ground didn't prepare itself; the farmer had to do it. But his work wasn't done after these initial efforts. Every year there were more rocks to remove and weeds to deal with, as you seasoned rock pickers and bean walkers know from experience. Even our modern machinery and advanced weed control options do not keep us from facing many challenges in preparing good ground and producing a crop.

In the same way, we cannot take the growth of our faith for granted. Just because faith was planted in our heart at Baptism does not mean the ground of our heart will always stay "good." Just because we were confirmed does not mean we could never lose the faith we once confessed. Jesus makes this abundantly clear.

He says that some hear the Word and receive it with joy, but in difficult times, times of testing, they fall away. These are not deeply rooted in the Word, which would sustain them in the intense troubles and trials of life. Others hear the Word, but it soon takes a back seat. They are caught up in *"the cares and riches and pleasures of life."* The temptations of the devil and the allurements of the world lead them astray. These set aside the Word and stop bearing the good fruits of faith.

These things can happen to you, and in fact they have. None of us can say that our ears have been perfectly attuned to the Word of God. Maybe we think we can turn one ear to the Word and one ear to the world. That is like trying to pay attention to your TV or smartphone while carrying on a conversation at the same time. One of the two things takes priority; the other is ignored. What do you suppose tends to win out between the world and the Word?

Jesus wants us to hear His Word with both our ears. *"Whoever is of God hears the words of God,"* He says. *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"* (Joh. 8:47, 10:27). Are your ears open to His Word? It isn't just a matter of going to church. You can go to church and not really hear. You can listen to the Word but decide in your heart that you are going to keep doing what you want. And no one, not your parents or your siblings or your spouse or your pastor, can make you do otherwise.

And you are right, no one can make you hear the Word and apply it to yourself. No one can make you repent of your sins and believe the Gospel message of God's grace. Jesus pointed out that for some, *"it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables."* Then he quoted from the prophet Isaiah that *"seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand."*

So how can you be sure that God wants you to know the secrets of His kingdom? How can you be sure that He wants you to hear and believe? Because you are hearing His Word right now. That's how God works faith and keeps you in the faith. *"[F]aith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ"* (Rom. 10:17). If God did not want you to receive His blessings through His Word, He would keep you from hearing it.

He wants you to hear it. In today's text when Jesus calls out, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear,"* the form of the verb indicates that He repeated Himself, calling out again and again, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"* This is meant for your ears today. Jesus wants to create in you a clean heart and renew a right spirit within you. He wants to visit you in grace and bring the Holy Spirit to you. He wants to restore the joy of salvation to you and uphold you (Psa. 51:10-12).

He does all this through His powerful Word. He convicts you of your sin through His Holy Law, and He bestows His forgiveness and righteousness upon you through His Holy Gospel. Jesus does not say, "You are forgiven if you get your life in order." Or, "You can be saved if you

never sin again." He says that because of His suffering and death in your place, your sins are forgiven and forgotten. And because of His resurrection, your eternal salvation is guaranteed (Rom. 4:25).

Does that mean it doesn't really matter how you live, since all your sins are forgiven? Listen carefully: Jesus freed you from sin! He doesn't want you to remain in it or return to it. He wants you to repent of it, cast it off, be done with it. He wants the rocky ground of your doubts to be cleared. He wants the thorns of worldliness to be cut down and burned.

He wants nothing to keep you from hearing and growing in His Gospel of grace. He wants you to turn your face to the warmth of His saving light like a plant turns its face to the sun and soak up the bright rays of His promises. He wants you to drink deeply from the living water of His Word, so that your thirst for righteousness will be quenched, and you will *"never be thirsty again"* (Joh. 4:14).

Jesus wants you to be refreshed and comforted by His Word. The words He speaks to you are *"spirit and life"* (Joh. 6:63). By the power of the Holy Spirit, His words bring life to your soul. They give you blessings that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. The devil sows confusion, pain, and death. Jesus sows peace, joy, and life.

His promises are meant for your ears. *"[T]hose who hear the word of God and keep it"* are *"blessed,"* He says (Luk. 11:28). He gave you ears, so that you would hear His Gospel. He gave you ears, so that you would believe in Him and be saved. He gave you ears **For the Sake of Your Soul.** **Listen** to Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1Pe. 1:9). Listen to Him!

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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