

Series: Life Stories
Part II: Can You Hear Me Now?
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I want to begin this morning with a question: “How long is the average attention span?” Any guesses you want to share? To help us answer that question, there was an article citing a 2015 study by Microsoft with the title, “You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish.” (*Time.com*, by Kevin McSpadden, May 14, 2015) Donna Fallis our Director of Music brought this to our attention in our staff meeting last Monday. Anyone want to guess at the length of the attention span of a goldfish? It is, according to this study, nine seconds! The study also found out that “people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds.” So, since it has been more than eight seconds, for those of us who have lost interest already, let me repeat, “You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish.”

So, what does this have to do with this series of sermons on the parables of Jesus we are calling “Life Stories?” Well, one option would be to shorten the sermon from about twenty minutes to eight seconds! Or, I could have 150 eight-second mini-sermons that would last about twenty minutes total. But, what I think I want to do is to have this point out at least one reason why Jesus teaches in parables. I think Jesus teaches in parables to hold the listener's attention.

Parables are these gems that invite us in, often telling the story with a “twist” that teach us something new. And when I call parables gems, I mean that they are like a gem such as a diamond. When you hold a diamond up to the light, if the jeweler has made the cuts in the right way, the light will reflect through the diamond to display its color and brilliance. And if you take the same diamond and rotate it slightly, you will see different facets, and the diamond will reveal something you did not see before.

Parables in particular and Scripture in general, are like that diamond. We can go back to them again and again, and through the light of God's spirit at work in our hearts and minds, we can see new things or hear deeper truths that we have never seen or heard before. Parables are like great works of art – paintings, novels, plays, poetry, and music – that we can return to again and again to find God's deeper meanings hidden in them.

So, maybe that is what Jesus means when Jesus says at the end of this parable we are about to read, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” (Luke 4:8b, NIV) Or, if we put it in today's language, it might be something like this – “Can You Hear Me Now?” As we look at these parables, can we hear what God may be saying to us now?

Our passage for today from Luke 8:4-15 is often called “The Parable of the Sower.”

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” His disciples asked him what this

parable meant. He said, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, ““though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.” “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches, and pleasures and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

So, this parable is about planting seeds. And, like the disciples who ask Jesus what this means, we also may wonder what it means. Unlike some other parables, this time Jesus tells them what it means. The farmer goes out to spread seed and it falls on different types of ground. The farmer didn't really seem to be too concerned about where the seed goes. As Craig Barnes has said in his excellent sermon on this parable, there is a “reckless grace” to how the seed, which Jesus says represents the word of God, is scattered. There is no targeting of the audience based on preferences – it is just scattered everywhere!

Some of the seed falls on the hard ground, which was probably a path. Because the ground is hard, the seed never breaks through and just sits there on the surface, so the birds came to eat the free food. Jesus says this is like someone who hears the good news of God’s love, but it gets taken away before it ever has a chance to germinate in our heart and mind.

Some of the seed falls on rocky ground and has little water to develop roots. So, the plant starts out good, but soon withers up and dies. Jesus says this is like someone who responds to the good news at first and even experiences some initial joy at what has been found. But, when the going gets tough, the root system does not exist to allow someone to survive the difficult times of life that come to all of us.

Some of the seed falls on thorny ground. There are weeds that choke out the plant as it tries to grow. Jesus says this is like the person who starts out with faith. Maybe there is even enough soil to develop a spiritual root system – but life’s worries, riches, and pleasures choke out the plant. But, notice what happens to the plant. This is one of those facets of this gem of a parable I have never seen before. The plant does not die -- it just doesn’t “mature.” In a very subtle but profound way, Jesus is saying that worries, riches, and pleasures may not kill your faith – but they can keep your faith from growing into maturity. In other words, if we are always focused on worrying about tomorrow, or whether we have enough money, especially as compared to those around us, or our life focus is primarily on feeding our pleasures whatever they may be – we will remain spiritual children and not mature.

Finally, some of the seeds fall on good soil. This stands for those with open hearts and minds who not only hear the good news of God’s grace and love, but they retain it – perhaps like a plant retains enough moisture to survive when there is little rain. These are the plants that, in the end, produce a good crop of faith. That faith not only provides meaning, purpose, and long-term joy in our lives – it also enables us to multiply that faith and spread it to those around us as we make a difference in our world.

So, one obvious question is this: *What kind of soil are we?* For example, are we closed off to the things of God? Maybe we have been hurt by the church, or by someone else. Maybe there has been some other pain in our lives that makes it hard to trust anyone, much less a God whom we cannot see.

Maybe it is a question of whether any of this makes sense to us. Some have suggested that we now live in a “secular age.” This has developed over a long period of time. Whereas it used to be difficult not to believe in God, now we have entered an age when it is hard to believe in God. We are no longer “porous” or open to anything beyond the here and now. (From *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor)

Or, are we like the soil that started out with joy over what was found, but when the “going got tough” we just got going . . . away from God. We might be what some now call the “de-churched.”

Or, maybe we have a view of God as the “protector/fix-it God” who was supposed to keep us from ever experiencing anything bad in life. But when the difficult times came, we got mad at God for breaking what we thought was God’s part of the deal. But the problem there may be more with our view of God that may be more like what children believe, but not those who grow up and mature.

Or, maybe our spiritual soil is more like the thorny ground where the worries and cares of life choked out whatever joy we wish we had. Maybe our striving for more money for whatever reason may have put us on a treadmill that feels more like the mouse in the cage going round and round, but not getting anywhere we really want to go.

Or, while we may have called it “happiness,” our desire is really to live the most pleasure-filled life possible -- even though we know pleasure is not an end goal in life. And our desire for more pleasure simply goes up and up, and we are forced to raise the bar higher to the next level to try get the same thrill.

Or maybe, by the grace of God, we are good soil. When the word of God is dropped into our lives, it actually grows over time. We are as amazed as anyone at the spiritual growth in our lives, as well as the impact we may have made in the lives of others to make this world a better place.

Let me just say this: that *while our tendency may be to see ourselves as primarily one type of soil, my experience in life is that I have all four of these types of soil in my one life.* Sometimes I am closed off to the things of God and it just doesn’t get through for some reason. Or, sometimes I start off well and there is joy over what I see God doing in some area of my life or around me, but then life “tests” me in some way, and I don’t have the root system to make it through, so I fall short of the mark – which is one definition of the Greek word for sin, “falling short of the mark,” (*hamartia*)

Sometimes it is the worries of life that get me. Sometimes the worries are about money. Will there be enough? Will God come through this time and take care of my needs . . . and maybe some of my wants. It would be nice to have a little more, so I can be like those around me who always seem to have more. And the desire for pleasure, while a gift from God, always threatens to get out of hand and take over everything. So, instead of maturing, I find part of my life stunted or stalled in its spiritual growth.

But every now and then, by the grace of God, the seed falls on some good soil in my life, and over time it grows into something good. I am often more surprised than anyone at the spiritual growth --

either in my life, or the ways God uses me for good in the lives of others. Sometimes it works – and thanks be to God when it does!

Face it, *all of us have all four of these types of soils in our lives*. We are rarely just one type of soil. So, *what can we do with the spiritual soil of our lives?* While we always remind ourselves that we are not saved by what *we* do, but only by grace which is a gift that begins with God -- we can *choose* to do some things in response to and in anticipation of this grace.

First of all, we can be *open*. We can do whatever we can to be open to the seed of God's word, whenever and wherever it may fall into the soil of our lives. As I mentioned earlier, some scholars are saying that in our secular world, many are no longer "porous" or open to even the possibility of the "transcendent" – which is a big word for spiritual things, or what I would call "the things of God." Yet, I think there is also an emerging interest in the transcendent – that there must be something more than just this!

So, instead of focusing only on the here and now, we can be open to the possibility of God at work in our lives and in this world. We can pay attention to life around us and look for the fingerprints of God – maybe in creation, maybe in the arts, maybe in acts of kindness, maybe in the proclamation of truth, maybe in those who work for justice to make this world the kind of place it ought to be.

Some have suggested that people are not open because they think that all of this religious stuff is just ignorant superstition, and the heroic choice is to reject all of that. But, I want to suggest that those of us struggling in that way give faith a chance by searching out the best Christian thinkers and honestly consider their perspectives, rather than just dismissing them outright, or choosing the "easy" Christian targets so that we can simply ignore it all.

Someone else has suggested that one of the reasons we resist being open to the possibility of God, is *not* because we don't think God exists, but rather that we will face a greater challenge if God really *does* exist and this story about Jesus is true. What do we do then? Do we still reject the truth outright? On what grounds? We just don't like it? But, if we are genuinely seeking the truth wherever it may lead us, then being open to the truth means the possibility of having to follow the one who claims to be the way, the truth, and the life. *Be open*.

We can also *prepare* our "soil" to receive the word of God. This often comes through the timeless spiritual practices we all know about like weekly worship. I would also add daily prayer, the reading of scripture, and meditating on what God might say to us in our lives. I would add gathering at least monthly with others who are also seeking to follow the ways of God. Those spiritual practices can prepare the soil of our lives so that the seed can take root!

Finally, I want to talk about *time*. As is clear in this parable and some of the others Jesus tells, *real growth takes time*. Stephen Covey refers to this as "the law of the farm." He says that you cannot just plant seeds one day and expect to reap a harvest the very next day. Real growth takes time. It takes time to prepare the soil. It takes time to plant the seed. It takes time for it to grow. There may even be times of testing and trials while we are waiting. And no matter how good the soil may be, it still takes time. As we said earlier, we are not that great with staying focused and on task. Real spiritual growth takes more than eight seconds!

You may have heard of another modern-day parable about the Chinese Bamboo tree. After the seed for the Chinese Bamboo tree is planted, you see nothing for four years – except for a tiny shoot coming out of a bulb. But during those four years, all of the growth is underground in a massive,

fibrous root structure that spreads deep inside the earth. And then in the fifth year the Chinese Bamboo tree grows. It can grow to up to eighty feet in one year!

Sometimes God plants a seed in our lives and nothing appears to happen for a long time. Maybe we think the seed never made it into the ground – it was too hard and birds came and had a free lunch. Or, maybe there was not enough moisture in the rocky soil for the root structure to grow, and what started off well just died somewhere along the way. Or, maybe all of the worries or temptations in life just choked it out. It may still be alive, but you can barely see it – just a tiny shoot coming up out of the ground.

But, maybe God is at work deep in the underground of our lives. God is working in ways we cannot yet see, because God wants to do something amazing and spectacular in us and through us, but it takes time to do something like that. So we wait. We wait – one year, two years, three years, four years, and then in year five, when we thought it was all over, something of the kingdom of God explodes upward in our lives ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet, forty feet, fifty feet, sixty feet, seventy feet . . . eighty feet!

Today I want to invite you to be *open* to things of God. *Prepare* the soil of your life. Then give it some *time*. *Sometimes it takes a long time for God's timing!* The Bible has two Greek words for “time.” *Chronos* refers to the hours and minutes that mark the simple passage of time. But *kairos* is about timing. It's what the Bible means when it says that “in the fullness of time” – in God's timing – something happens! Friends, we all *exist* in *chronos* time; but we live – we really *live* in *kairos* time. So hold on, give it time, and hang in there -- because God's fifth year is on its way!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.