**Theme: Be at rest; Take time to Listen! God’s power is at work!**

**TUMC August 15, 2021**

**Mark 4: 1-34**

**I am sitting on a hillside, resting beside the Sea of Galilee. With me are other students, pastors and spouses who have been touring Israel and the West Bank --at a very rapid pace--trying to see everything important in the few days we have allotted for our journey. Patty Shelly, a biblical scholar and competent tour guide, has brought us here to this peaceful scene to listen to the words of Mark 4.**

**The hillside curves to form a kind of amphitheatre. The words that are spoken from the water’s edge are clearly heard by those of us sitting further up on the hill. We reflect on the fact that this may have been one of the reasons that Jesus spoke from the boat.**

**It is a peaceful scene and my mind wanders as I hear the familiar words of the parable of the different soils in which the seed is sown. I see a small path made hard by many feet as adults and children climb down to the water. I see some thistles growing among the grasses and without much effort I can find some stony ground. I imagine someone with a bag filled with seed at her side throwing the seed rather generously first to one side and then to the other.**

**I reflect on the fact that this was probably a familiar sight in Galilee in the time of Jesus. I don’t catch on to the astounding part of the parable; after all I am not dependent on the harvest and do not understand how unusual it would be for the harvest to be anywhere near the 30-100 fold increase that is promised in the parable!**

**I recognize that Jesus is speaking about the nature of the reign of God; speaking in simple stories that everyone can identify with. I wonder what it means that he tells stories so that they understand “as far as they were capable of understanding.” I note how Jesus punctuates his brief stories with the repeated challenge, “Let anyone with ears to hear, Listen! I listen again to the stillness around me and wonder “what word am I supposed to hear today?”**

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**I am back from Israel and the West Bank, back to my studies doing research on the gospel of Mark. I am particularly interested in the question of power and authority and how we in the church handle and sometimes misuse the power and authority of the biblical word. I have chosen the gospel of Mark to help me in my quest. As I get to chapter 4 in the gospel , I notice something that I did not expect. I realize that these parables are all about power—something I had missed in my earlier readings of this chapter. Mark tells us that these parables are about the kingdom of God, the *basilea* of God. This term is associated with the notion of the reign of a king—a king who has power and authority. The question for me becomes: how do these parables illuminate the nature of the power of God? Of God’s vision of how a “kingdom” should function? Will listening more deeply help me understand this *basilea* of God?**

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**This unexpected challenge, to listen and really hear, has accompanied me through the years that followed. It is a strange challenge because it does not require us to work harder, nor to strive mightily, nor to expend all our energy in persuading others about God’s reign (nor even to do scholarly study of the gospel of Mark) ---Rather the challenge is to simply become still and to listen-- to listen deeply—knowing that the seed sown will grow and flourish within us and the fruit will follow.**

**Our theme for the summer is: be at rest. That fits so nicely with the parable of the seed that grows without our effort. This simple story tells us we as individuals and as a congregation can relax. God will work within us so that there will be fruit.**

**But why then are the disciples so perplexed? Why does Jesus have to explain this simple parable to them? Why do some people not catch on to what the parables are about?**

**For me the key is in a rather troublesome verse in the middle of this chapter. Jesus is explaining the parable of the various soils to the twelve and those around them. He quotes from Isaiah to make his point.**

**Verses 11-12.**

***To you [that is the listeners] has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside [the non-listeners] everything comes in parables, in order that “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand, so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.”***

**Jesus is telling his followers that there are insiders and there are outsiders, there are those who understand what the reign of God is all about and there are some who do not understand, there are those who will turn and be forgiven but there are also those whose hearts are hardened. Some know the secret of the kingdom and others do not.**

**This is troublesome to those of us who want to be inclusive of everyone. We associate being outside with being excluded, being shut out by the community and its rules, being forced outside by the dominating power of those with status in the community.**

**In this biblical passage it is the message of Jesus about the kingdom that creates outsiders and insiders. Is Jesus not inclusive? What do we make of this?**

**And then it strikes me. The power that makes a seed grow is a different kind of power than the oppressive power that is so evident in the politics of our society and even sometimes in the church. One term that Mark uses to speak about the miracles is the term *dynamis* which can be defined a bit more like creative energy or the ability to change or transform something from one element to another. Miracles for Mark were “deeds of power” or deeds of creative energy. The healings and feedings of the crowd are like the power that can transform seed into fruit, a dark room into one filled with light, and listeners into those who truly understand.**

**We know that the presence of Jesus in the community-- with the kind of power and authority that he embodied--did create a kind of division between those who understood and those who didn’t, between insiders and outsiders in the kingdom or as some would say the commonwealth of God. Those who begin to listen have their hearts softened, have their eyes opened! Those who do not listen have their hearts hardened, their eyes remain closed.**

**When we examine the ministry of Jesus we note that no-one was forced outside or pulled inside against their will; Jesus did not attempt to dominate or convert people using physical or social or psychological pressure. What the presence of Jesus did do was disclose or reveal what was already present in the listeners. His presence revealed and exposed the many obstacles and excuses that kept the listeners from fully embracing the way of Jesus.**

**Jesus preached and taught and corrected, hoping that the ears of the listeners would be open to hear the message he brought. He spoke in images and parables leaving the listeners the choice as to whether they were willing to be vulnerable, to listen with openness, to be willing to change so that their hearts would not be hardened. He continued to call out to all potential kingdom dwellers:**

**“Let anyone with ears to hear, Listen”.**

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**For me the parable of the various soils provides a kind synopsis or “Coles notes” summary of the longer story that Mark tells us. If we read his gospel closely, we can see that he gives us many clues as to who the insiders are, who the outsiders are and who those in the middle are, those who are potential fruit-bearing members of God’s kingdom, those around Jesus but not yet ready to fully commit to following Jesus to where-ever he leads.**

**This morning I want to l do a quick overview of the book of Mark asking the question: which characters in the story are pictured as insiders, which as outsiders and which as potential fruit-bearing persons. The purpose is not to identify others as belonging to any one of these groups. Rather the goal is to be self-reflective, to gain new insights into our own hearts; maybe something will be revealed or exposed that we had not expected.**

**First of all, Let us turn to the insiders:**

**From the story of the parable, we learn that insiders bear fruit, and praise God because of the unexpectedness of the bountiful harvest. We can identify some of these insiders by paying attention to those characters that display both unexpected response and surprising praise.**

**Right in the next chapter we will read of one such character. A man possessed by demons lives among the dead in the tombs, self destructive and out of control. But he is the one who recognizes Jesus as the Son of God and cries out for healing. After the healing by Jesus, he is told to tell others in his village about Jesus and Mark tells us that “everyone was amazed!”**

**There are numerous stories of people healed, followed by amazement, —the hemorrhaging woman, Jairus’ daughter, the paralytic and so on. Each of these people are praised for their faith. The ones being healed come from the various strata of society, but are minor characters in the longer story. Their story is told briefly and then they disappear from the story as characters.**

**But for the listeners of the story, these vulnerable people exemplify the values of the kingdom--a trust in Jesus that overcomes fear and hesitance, even unbelief. A trust that Jesus will give us all that we need to live the abundant life that brings us joy and blesses others.**

**One story that always touches me emotionally is the story of the woman anointing Jesus with oil just before the crucifixion. The others present rebuked her harshly for wasting the oil. Jesus commends her saying, “She did a beautiful thing. . .wherever the good news will be preached, what she has done, will be told in memory of her.” The fruit of her simple action of love reverberates in us even today.**

**Mark tells two stories that underscore that it is the ones without obvious status and power in this world who are at the centre of the kingdom of God.**

**In the first incident, the disciples are arguing as to who will be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus places a child into their midst, puts his arms around the child and says: If anyone wants to be first, they must make themself last of all and servant of all.”**

**In the second incident, the disciples want to keep the mothers and children from Jesus so that Jesus can speak to the more important adults. Instead Jesus is indignant and insists that the children should come to him, “for it is to these that the kingdom belongs”.**

**It seems that in Mark’s gospel insiders are those who know they need healing, are vulnerable and even needy, but know where the source of power is. These are the seemingly insignificant characters in the story, those without status, who come to Jesus in simple trust. Jesus welcomes them, for the kingdom already belongs to them.**

**Even today, Jesus calls out to all who feel powerless and vulnerable, tired and needy: “Take heart; It is I. Do not be afraid! Trust in me, for it is to you that the kingdom of God belongs! You are already kingdom dwellers!”**

**“Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!”**

**Secondly, the outsiders**

**In Mark the outsiders are clearly identified as those who have hardened their hearts and do not understand kingdom values. They are presented as stereotypes rather than individually, part of a system of religion and political alliances. These characters clearly do not understand the parables. They question Jesus, not in order to understand, but to condemn. They are the opponents of Jesus and are described as a group. They are the ones who seek status by appearing religious. They fear both Jesus and the crowd. Though they seem powerful, they are pictured as weak and impotent, catering to self -interest and popular opinion. They are the ones that our text describes as “what they already have will be taken away from them”, that is, the truth which they thought they understood will become unreasonable to them, they will not be able to perceive it with any understanding.**

**These non-listeners are present right from the beginning of the story, creating an escalating division among the people, moving the story line toward increasing violence. They are the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, fearful and angry that their status is in danger—They are those with political power who use that power violently against the “vulnerable ones” whom Jesus draws into his healing ministry. The fruit of this kind of hardened soil is the violent death of Jesus.**

**Even today Jesus calls out to all who strive for status and power, who are caught up in the systems of oppression and public opinion: “Consider carefully how and to whom you are listening—Spiritual discernment comes with deep listening to the One who knows the creative, transforming power of God. Open your ears and eyes and see what this kingdom power is all about. Let God soften you hearts so that you may again hear the good news of Jesus and bear good fruit.**

**“Let anyone with ears to hear, Listen!”**

**Who are those “around Jesus” the potential fruitful followers?**

**These are the ones who struggle to listen, who struggle to understand, but who find this difficult because of the obstacles that are in their way. The parable of the soils is primarily about these listeners who want to follow Jesus but who are afraid and make poor choices and sometimes fall away.**

**These characters have conflicting traits, sometimes appearing faithful, other times falling into the very temptation that they have been warned about. It is in the gospel of Mark where the followers of Jesus are most pictured as fallible, as afraid, as unfaithful.**

**One rather ironic example of the disciples not listening is found only in the gospel of Mark. Mark describes two feedings of the crowd, separated only by a chapter. In chapter 6 we have the feeding of the 5000. Then in chapter 8 we have another feeding, the feeding of the 4000. Was Mark confused and repeating himself. Or where there really two feedings?**

**But perhaps there is a hint in the parable of the soils. Mark tells us that the 12--that innermost circle who followed Jesus-- when they were on the boat after the feeding of the 5000, did not understand “about the loaves”; they did not catch on to the deeds of power that were released so that the crowd could be fed. Mark adds these words: “their hearts were hardened.” When the crowds were hungry just as they were in the first feeding, the disciples continue to ask almost innocently, “Where can we find food to feed so many?!” God needs to continue to work in their hearts so that they will truly become fruitful.**

**We can think of individual characters too: like the rich young man who wished to follow Jesus but his riches stood in the way. Or the disciples who wanted to be the greatest in the kingdom, or Peter who denies Jesus… All are in danger because their hearts are capable of being hardened, that is their hearts are not fully receptive to learning more, to following on the way when persecution or trouble comes into their lives. They are too invested in their own visions of the kingdom where status matters, where power comes with wealth, and where temptations to deny the way of Jesus are ever present. Their hearts need healing in order to grasp the kind of creative power that the reign of God is all about.**

**Jesus knows their hearts and gently goes about teaching and healing, inviting and forgiving, praying that those in the crowd around him will become receptive, will listen and will enter the kingdom with its alternative values. Jesus stands among them, embodying the values of the kingdom, rejecting dominating and oppressive power. He even becomes willing to go the way of the cross rather than to call on angels to slay his enemies.**

**Even today Jesus calls out to all potential fruit-bearing followers: “Don’t you understand? Why are you afraid? Come aside and learn from me what God’s kingdom power is all about”.**

**“Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!”.**

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**I have found this meditation difficult to write. The parables expose and reveal who I am as a fallible follower of Jesus! But exposing human sin and fallibility is not the goal of the parables. Instead, the parables point all of us, no matter with which group we identify most easily, to the Source of true kingdom power. We can rest with the assurance that the seed that is sown is growing even when we only understand in part. We can rest when storms surround us, because the power of Jesus works despite our hesitant responses. We can be strong because God’s strength works through our weakness--forgiving, healing and creating new responses. We can take up the cross and follow Jesus, though perhaps at a distance, into the dark places of violence and sin, knowing that the power of Jesus will hold us fast as we confront evil and bring light into places of darkness.**

**The ultimate goal of the parables is to bring us to that place of joy and gratitude that overflows with love for others, empowering us to bring forth fruit.**

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**For a moment, let us return to the sea of Galilee and rest. Let us sit on the hillside and observe the Sower of the seed. Let us sit quietly, giving thanks that God continues to speak to us in such a variety of ways. Let us rejoice that God works within us as individuals and within us as a congregation to bring forth fruit, some 30 fold, some 60 fold and some 100 fold. Let us rest a while and listen deeply to the parables that Jesus tells! Let us hear Jesus call out to us:**

**“Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!”**