

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2015, Year B

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 4:26-34

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear"

One of my most memorable experiences in 2002, after uprooting my family from Jacksonville, Fl. to Ambridge, PA, on the shore of the Ohio River, just outside Pittsburgh, in order to attend Trinity School for Ministry, was learning and using the ancient Koine Greek language. My first thought was "why do we have to learn Greek?" It wasn't even the modern stuff – by this was ancient. I soon found out! It was not easy by any stretch of the imagination, and brought me quite often to my knees, seeking the strength of God, the Father and understanding my limits. I had not been in college for thirty years! I had my bachelor's degree – but suddenly I find myself in Seminary, by the grace of God and by His calling. I was confident that all of these courses that I would be taking – He would help me through. I found out very quickly how little I can do without Him. It was not at all unlike Nik Wallenda, as he crossed the Niagara Gorge on the high wire, constantly seeking God's peace and praising Him along the journey. On National TV – Praise the Lord! He was not afraid. Wow! It was a daunting task that only the Lord could equip him for; and for me - so was learning Ancient Greek - which would of course become a very important tool to have in my "toolbag" as I stepped out in ministry. The New Testament was not written in Hebrew, it was not written in Latin, it was written in ancient Koine Greek and it gives the opportunity for the minister to read the original New Testament translation – how it was written. There are manuscripts of the original that are still around and can be checked and seeing the intended meaning, and not that of a translator. I must add that one of the concerns of Muslims regarding the New Testament – they claim that the Injeel (their name for the New Testament) has been changed, that it has been modified – and they don't realize that we have the original Greek text. We can show them the truth that Jesus is Lord still exists - has not been modified in any way or tampered with in any form. When they hear that, many come in droves to seek Jesus. I would sit in class learning ancient Koine Greek and I would watch in amazement as Dr. Grant LeMarquand (now Bishop LeMarquand) one of the remarkable professors at Trinity, as he would read in English to us from his Greek New Testament. Can you just imagine, he was reading the Greek and speaking the English to us! Here was a man for which English was not his first language – French – he is from Montreal! There is a wheel going – as he is reading and translating to me and all of us in English. Our Greek professor, Ann Castro would have us begin every class by praying together the Lord's Prayer in Greek – from our Greek New Testaments - the language in which the New Testament was written.

I would like us to think about the beloved Lord's Prayer in which is a phrase that stays with me every time we pray this prayer in English – the Greek phrase βασιλεία σου (basilea sue) "*your kingdom*" reminds me of what Jesus came to share with us – to preach about and to deliver us to – God's Kingdom. He did not call God "His Father" in this prayer but instead "Our Father."

The kingdom that was to come would come though Jesus Himself, and is indeed here – but not thoroughly fulfilled until He comes again. Theologians call this "eschatology" or the study of the "end times." The Rev. Dr. Ed Stetzer, the Executive Director of Lifeway Research, in his

Saturday address at the Anglican Church in North America 2012 Assembly, told us that “*God didn’t START reigning when Jesus came to Earth or STOP reigning when Jesus left. **God has always reigned over the universe!** There has not been a time when God has not been sovereign.*” However, at this moment, He said, *the reign of the kingdom of God is “**already, but not yet**” because the world is in rebellion against the good and sovereign rule of God.*” He went on to say “*The world is broken. It’s lost and it’s dark. The reality is this: It sure doesn’t seem like there’s a King reigning in righteousness.*” The enemy is doing everything he can to keep it that way – pulling blinders over people’s eyes, and earphones over their ears so they don’t hear the word fully and truly and accept it; and understand it. He explained that while we already have the victory through Jesus, “*We live between the times...between the first and the second coming of Christ.*” And so we wait.

In today’s Holy Gospel, Jesus was addressing crowds who hoped that Jesus would be a conqueror, a warrior, who would deliver their nation and defeat Rome. Isn’t it amazing that the last two Sundays there has been an underlying theme of people’s expectations of what Jesus was – and in some cases still is? No - instead, He called twelve ordinary men and founded a "new nation," a spiritual nation whose citizens had their names written down in heaven. Jesus told them in Luke 10:20 "*that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.*" The Apostle Paul proclaims the same in Philippians 3:20, as he writes "*our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

The crowds wanted Jesus to behave like a loyal Jewish man and honor His family, but Jesus had a different idea, and established a "new family" made up of all those who trusted Him, believed in Him and did the will of God, our Father. The crowds also expected Jesus to restore the kingdom of David and bring back Israel's lost glory; but His response was to announce a new kingdom, a spiritual kingdom – “*the Kingdom of God.*”

John the Baptist had announced that the arrival of the King was near and he had warned the people to repent and prepare to meet Him, preaching and saying these words found in Mark 1:7-8. Please turn in your Pew Bibles to page 1556, "*After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.*" "*I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*" Jesus took up John's message and preached the Good News of the kingdom and the need for sinners to repent and believe. But what “on earth” is this kingdom like? If the Lord was not going to beat the Romans, restore Israel and set up a political kingdom, what kind of kingdom was He planning to establish?

Through parables Jesus explained the kingdom, not by giving a lecture on theology, but by painting word pictures that captured the attention of the people and required them to use their imaginations and “put on their thinking caps.” The English word *parable* comes from two Greek words that mean "to cast alongside" (*para*—alongside; *ballo*—to throw or cast). A parable is a story or figure placed alongside a teaching to help us understand its meaning. Quite often the word “like” is used in it to compare. Some have called them "an earthly story

with a heavenly meaning," but it is more than that, and it certainly is not an illustration" or story that we might use in a sermon. A true parable gets the listener deeply involved and induces the listener to make a personal decision about God's truth and his or her own life. Jesus' parables were so personal and powerful that, after they heard several of them, the religious leaders wanted to kill the Lord Jesus!

A parable begins quite innocently as *a word picture* that grabs our attention and spikes our interest but it then becomes a mirror in which we suddenly see the reflection of ourselves. Through faith in Christ, this mirror transforms into a window through which we see God and His truth. Just how we respond to that truth will determine what further truth God will teach us. Please note that not everyone got the meaning of the parables. In the Gospel's of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus says "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*" (Matthew 11:15, Mark 4:9, 4:23, 7:16, Luke 14:35, 8:8) As a matter of fact the very last words of today's Holy Gospel say that Jesus "*was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.*" Not everyone has ears to hear! Some close their ears because they do not want to hear – or like what they are hearing.

Please turn in your Pew Bibles to today's Holy Gospel from Mark 4: 26 on page 1562. To set the stage - Jesus had just taught the people the Parable of the Sower (or the 4 soils) and there was quite a bit of confusion. Jesus met with them privately and explained to them that mankind does not make a seed grow – God does! It has to be on fertile soil for that seed to take hold. Today we learn about God's Kingdom being compared to a "growing seed." The Sower plants the seed but it is God who makes it grow. I personally cannot stand it when people brag "oh, I brought 3 people to Christ!" You may have introduced them to Christ, but it is the Holy Spirit who brings them to Himself, transforms and changes them – we do not have that kind of power and never will! Oh, don't stop introducing Christ to people and sharing His love. We are NOT the saviors – Jesus is! That is part of the point He is making here. We have no control over that, EVER! Whether the farmer sleeps or gets up – the seed sprouts and grows – though he does not know how. We don't have that kind of power. He is teaching us that. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head – and then the full kernel. Jesus goes on and teaches a very famous parable; the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

So why did Jesus teach in parables? His disciples asked Him that very question in Mark 4:10-12 and Matthew 13:10-17. It would seem that Jesus used **parables both to hide the truth and to reveal it**. You might say that the crowd did not judge the parables; but instead the parables judged the crowd! The uncaring listener, who thought he knew everything, would hear only a story that he did not really understand, and the end result would be judgment. Please turn one page before today's reading – page 1561 to Mark 4:9 "*Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.*" It takes more than just listening to truly hear and comprehend – sometimes, like when you're learning ancient Koine Greek - we NEED to ask for help. You have to learn what it means to be on your knees and ask God to explain it, just as the disciples asked Jesus to explain it to them.

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Jesus prayed in Matthew 11:25 *"I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants."* He then promised that those seeking the truth should come to Him, to seek Him and learn from Him. Jesus said *"All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Anyone who is having trouble understanding the Bible, understanding a parable – Go to the Author! Seek Him, ask Him to touch you with the Word of truth. He then said *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS."* I want you to picture the image of a yoke. It is one of those wooden things that goes over the shoulder of an oxen. Traditionally there would be two holes – one big one and one small one. An older oxen would be yoked in the bigger hole and next to him or her would be another younger animal who would walk along with that older animal, and teach them the way of the yoke; how to walk, when to stop, when to turn. That is what Jesus is saying - *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS."* And then the part that should touch your heart - *"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."* (Matthew 11:27-30) What Jesus is saying is "walking along with Me is easy" – "I'll do the hard part – and my burden – the burden that I am giving to you is light. I'll do the hard stuff – just seek Me and walk with Me."*

A truly sincere listener, who wants to know learn and understand God's truth, would think about the parable, recognize and confess their ignorance, submit to the Lord, and then begin to understand the spiritual lesson Jesus wanted to teach.

- How many people read a parable, struggle to understand it and then just blow it off?
- How many read, struggle and ask for Jesus to give clarity – the same clarity that He gave to *"His own disciples"*? Jesus does not want us to be wasting time or energy struggling – but instead He wants us to come beside Him, learn from Him, and REST in Him. Jesus calls us to pray.

I never would have been able to tackle 2 semesters of Greek without seeking Jesus to help me, to teach me. Believe me, lesson learned! It has equipped me, because after those two semesters, we had classes called "exegesis" during which we had to go through New Testament Scriptures in Greek to understand what the original intent was – the true meaning. Quite often as I am preparing a sermon or Bible lesson, I open the Greek New Testament - and look for the intention. Why was this said? What is the context, how do you understand it? That is the purpose.

Jesus placed a great deal of importance on *the hearing of the Word of God*. The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:17. Remember this and carry it with you as you leave today. *"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."* His must be a part of our lives! It must be a part of our DNA here at St. Andrew's that we are in the Word of God – not just on Sunday's. Did you know that there are some great apps on the on the phone that you can download a Bible? When you are struggling – see what God has to say about it.

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There is a brother here in the church that when he is troubled – he opens the Bible and says “God show me where you want me to be?” Quite often he finds exactly what God wants him to learn.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ must be proclaimed, heard and demonstrated in our lives. Jesus used the word *hear* thirteen times in Mark 4:1-34. Jesus was speaking about hearing with spiritual discernment. To "*hear*" the Word of God means to understand it and obey it. As the Apostle James reminds us – we need to be “*doers of the word, and not merely hearers.*” (James 1:22)

Thanks be to God that we have been given a testimony; we have been given the truth; the unchanging truth that IS the Word of God. I urge you to be not just hearers of the Word – but doers!