



LISTEN: “Hearing with the Heart”

Bible Text: Matthew 19:13-21

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Probably everyone here has heard the ubiquitous ad that ran “forever” by the guy who once worked for the dark side of the cellular world, and then came into the light with Sprint. This one.*

Turns out hearing one another is harder than that. It’s not just a matter of language or age or culture. In the rare moments when we try, it’s hard to find enough common ground in order to even have a meaningful conversation. And that’s just in our own households, between husbands and wives and parents and children. Have mercy!

*In Thornton Wilder’s play, “Our Town,” the narrator expresses this truth, “People are never able to say right out what they think... You’ve got to catch it between the lines; you’ve got to over-hear it.”¹

It’s even harder to try to bridge the incredible differences, political and otherwise that are the fabric of our time.

Sometimes in the Church, we think that if people were just better informed about the world’s needs, we could solve its problems. So, we throw out more information, we host dialogues, like that.

But long ago, Søren Kierkegaard, observed: “There is no lack of information in a Christian land. Something else is lacking...”²

We do not suffer from a lack of information in our age, God help us! We have information out the ears! We suffer from a lack of inspiration or motivation. We need a Word from the Almighty!

¹ *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*, by Thornton Wilder. Copyright © 1938, New York: Coward McCann.

² Søren Kierkegaard, as quoted in *Overhearing the Gospel*. Copyright © 1979, Nashville: Abingdon Press.

But how does that Word come? Preachers like me can speechify all day saying *“you ought to do this or that.”* But I gave up the illusion long ago that people would change just because I think they should.

“Something else is lacking....” In his book, Overhearing the Gospel, Fred Craddock talks about how hard it is to preach and teach the faith of Jesus to people like us who already think we’ve heard it.³

He says, *“The question is not whether the Church is dying, each generation inevitably will, but whether it’s giving its life for the world.”*

The call to character is a risky and unpopular business. Always was. I don’t know about you, but I wonder when we’ll ever be done with what one sociologist of religion has called the *“Church of Oprah”* – and our almost exclusive focus on tending our own personal needs?

I wonder when we will be ready to get back to placing our emphasis where Jesus did, on the love of God and love of neighbor?

Jesus said, Mark 10:45: *“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Where is that heroic spirit today in our self-absorbed, put me first, build bigger walls, others worries are their problem, culture?

Not very visible, is it? I mean, we can be told what is the right thing to do, we can even sort of believe in it, but motivating us to do something else is quite different. It takes more than information.

In the early 1980’s when I was a squeaky clean, freshly minted preacher, I picked up an old, completely “secular,” book at a used book sale that transformed my thinking about life and ministry.

³ Overhearing the Gospel: Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Persons Who Have Already Heard (*The Lyman Beecher Lectures*) by Fred B. Craddock. Copyright © 1979, Nashville: Abingdon Press.

It was Listening With The Third Ear by Theodor Reik.

It wasn't an assigned text for my seminary work. I think paid less than a dollar for it. Its value has been inestimable.

It turns out that by *“The Third Ear,”* Reik meant the intuitive sense we possess that can take us beyond the obvious. It's that sense which younger adults have in finely tuned form, that enables them to quickly separate the wheat from the chaff, truth from error.

Others of us have it too, thank God. But some of the young are better at it than those who only listen to viewpoints we already agree with. Still, it's not really an age or generational problem.

It's a human problem. This week's Bible text contains two stories from Matthew's Gospel which are familiar to Christians. Although they are right next to one another, we never read them together.

Matthew 19:13 starts with a familiar scene: **“Little children were being brought to Jesus so he might bless them.”* Then, verse 13 continues: *“The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them.”*⁴

In verse 14, Jesus famously said: *“Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”*⁵

And following that, Matthew 19:16 begins: *“Then someone came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?”*⁶

In verse 17, after reminding him that only God is good, *“(Jesus) said to him, ‘If you wish to have eternal life, keep the commandments.’”*⁷

That information wasn't what he needed. He already knew.

⁴ Matthew 19:13, adapted from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*. Copyright © 1989. All rights reserved.

⁵ Ibid. Matthew 19:14, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

⁶ Ibid. Matthew 19:16, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

⁷ Ibid. Matthew 19:17, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

We already know, too. We have more information than we need.

In verse 20, the young man said, *“I have kept all these; what do I still lack?”*⁸ He knew as Jesus did, as Kierkegaard knew centuries later and as we know, *“Something else is lacking....”*⁹

Verse 21: *“Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”*¹⁰

Just beyond our text, verse 22 tells us, *“When the young man heard this Word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”*¹¹

**So often do we, it’s hard to admit, but true.
God help us! But there is a different way.**

On my grandfather’s brother’s farm in Cole Camp, Missouri, where we used to visit when I was a city kid from KC, there was an old-fashioned pump. My father showed me how it worked.

There was a jar by the pump, but to start the pump you had to pour the water into the pump to prime it, create a vacuum, then when you moved the handle up and down a few times, water would flow.

But here’s the thing - If you didn’t prime the pump, it didn’t work.

But if you did, when you poured the water into the pump, moved the handle up and down, waited for the water, first warm, then cool, finally cold and delicious, you could take a drink. It was the best.

But afterward, my Father asked, *“Did you fill the jar for the next person?”* My answer was this: *“I should have - I guess I forgot.”*

⁸ Ibid. Matthew 19:20, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

⁹ Op. Cit. Søren Kierkegaard, as quoted in *Overhearing the Gospel*.

¹⁰ Op. Cit. Matthew 19:21, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

¹¹ Ibid. Matthew 19:22, *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

People are like that. we leave others to clean up after us, take care of what they forgot, fill the jar. We often think of ourselves first.

A better way, my father explained, was to pour the water into the pump, pump for the water, first warm, then cool, take a cold drink, and then afterward fill the jar for the next person.

That's what most of us try to do. We take care of our families and ourselves. And we do our best to remember to care for others from what is left when we have done so. If there is anything left or time.

There is another alternative. We could pour the water into the pump, move the handle up and down, wait for the water, first warm, then cool, and finally cold and delicious, then first fill up the jar for the next person, and then only afterward take a drink yourself.

Fred Craddock in one of his later sermons had a similar experience, and after telling it asked, *“Do you understand the lesson of the pump?”*¹² Do we? Do we understand about the something more?

Jesus said over, and over again, *“He who has ears, let him hear.”*¹³

What will it finally take to get down to the truth with us?

Because in Matthew 16:26 Jesus says this,

*“What will it profit you to gain the whole world but lose your very soul? What will your life be worth then?”*¹⁴

Let us pray.

¹² Inspired by a story told by Fred B. Craddock. Saint Paul School of Theology, 1983.

¹³ Matthew 11:15, Matthew 13:9, Matthew 13:43, Mark 4:9, Luke 8:8, Luke 14:35. The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

¹⁴ Mathew 16:26, paraphrased by the author.