

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost Sermon - Transcript
St Thomas Episcopal Church Oriental NC – 07-12-26
The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas

We have heard the gospel text of Jesus and the Parable of the Sower. And every time I hear it, I go back to those deep discussions that we had in seminary over why it had to be said twice, and who decided to basically put in Jesus's mouth the explanation, because that typically does not happen out of a parable. And it would go on and on and on, but in the end, the real discussion point that we eventually would get to was we would find the word extravagant, and the word extravagant would begin to describe what God's love offers each and every one of us, because of the extravagant use of seeds thrown everywhere all the time, never knowing what's going, with the hope that perhaps the good would come from it.

So in essence, we have the whole sermon done, and if you like, I'll sit down. No, I'm not going to do that. We'll keep going.

Now, I think this sermon explores how listening helps you sow the extravagant love of God you received from the Sower. He who has ears, those who have ears, listen. So listening is a major part of the teaching that is involved in this particular parable.

The sermon explores how listening helps you sow the extravagant love of God you received from the Sower. I'm going to make the assumption that you might agree that just maybe, just maybe, since you showed up here on a summer Sunday, there's a tad bit of good soil in you somewhere, all right? So thank you, we'll give you that, and don't walk out with that righteous feel, all right? Because something will happen to wake the opportunity to slap on the side of the head for me. But the main point is, you're here.

And it's not to say that those elsewhere are not righteous and good soil. They may be doing other things in different ways. But this is a story that I want to explore more from me because of the notion of listening.

The one who has ears, listen. I have strong Benedictine roots. When I've been with you before, I've quoted from the rule of St. Benedict, that rule first created to live together in community in the 600s, that still has great power for us today.

That rule that speaks to stability, sticking with it. Obedience, or its root word, oboedire, one who is obedient is one who listens. And then conversatio morum, conversion of life.

So out of the rule of St. Benedict, one who listens to God and to one another, especially in a community, might just be considered obedient, all right? So that's the root of what happens with good listening. We just might be an extension of that extravagant love of God. When we go out into the world because we have listened and by virtue of, from a Christian viewpoint, our baptism, we are called to share this good news.

We are called to go and be sowers. We are also, by our hands, that which throw forth this extravagant love of God in many, many seeds, or as I'll try to unfold in just a moment in a more personal story, what it is to have a single seed sown in you by a casual comment, by somebody who I came to deeply respect, who had watched my behavior over many years, and said what I needed to hear at the moment I needed to hear it. And because of God's grace, I actually heard it.

And so that's the essence of the story. But if the seed had not been thrown towards me, whatever good earth that I had building up within me might not have, if you will, caught it or taken it in because it became one of the powerful moments that helped me become more of who God created me to be and possibly I could lay claim, changed my life. So the story is actually a fairly simple one.

Next Sunday, I will be at Kanuga, outside of Hendersonville. Anybody who knows Kanuga Camp and Conference Centers knows how wonderful that's there. My family and I have been going to Kanuga since, oh goodness, 1992, 93, we think, every year.

It was the place for another story to be told, maybe in August, about how it renewed my spirit, but I'll leave it that for that. Here, this is the fact, we've gone every year since my son, who is now 43, was 11 years old. So I'll give you, we have missed very few.

I think we had one summer we didn't get to go. Every year we see the same basic people during guest period four, and it's like a family reunion every year to see these folks, and we watch our kids and their kids grow, their kids have come. You know that my son Adam is a priest.

He's had the privilege of baptizing his friends' babies. Nobody's asked me to baptize anybody yet at Kanuga. Maybe this is the put out that I'll put in the sermon.

Anyway, in this crowd of witnesses that would be at Kanuga week in and week out, was when we first got there, I think our second summer, a fairly newly retired Episcopal priest, Peter W. Fleming, Jr., and Peter was one of those good wisdom givers with a wonderful sense of presence and a good sense of humor, and every year he and I would connect and chat with one another. It was great as a younger priest to have this wonderful older priest to look forward to seeing every summer, where I could almost report out, guess what I did this year? And then be kind of put appropriately in my place, which is always a good thing. Along about the eighth year there, Kanuga was doing one of its long-range planning sessions, which groups like this do from time to time.

And so people were gathered, you know, and they were talking about how this building would be here, we'd be doing that, and da-da-da, and I made a comment. And then later on, Peter said to me, and this is key, because he who has ears, listen. Don't lose sight of that part of what I'm trying to say.

Peter said to me, you know, I've watched you over the years. Hard to escape that. You actually have some pretty good ideas.

Thank you. Thank you. However, you have a tendency, once you start to share them, to over-talk.

You might want to start working on listening better. And that was one of the moments that changed my life. I've come to realize as I prayed through this this week, as I now mourn Peter, because I will not get to see him this coming week, before he died about, oh, a month ago, almost made it to age 96.

I believe he is an example of what it is like to be a sower who sowed something in me, and hopefully, as I share more, it took root and became useful. And the way it became useful for me is something I call the Yellow Pad Discipline. And maybe this will be useful for you.

And the Yellow Pad Discipline is a way I learned to counter the exuberance I might bring in encountering a new idea, and bringing it forward in a meeting, to the point that it could be useful for those in the meeting. And the way the yellow pad discipline works, I have this all up on my website, by the way, wctcoach.com,

works like this. I'm in a meeting, let's say it's a vestry meeting, okay? At a vestry meeting, and something comes up, and I have my yellow pad in front of me, and my pen, and I have this thought, and rather than sharing it immediately, I make a note on my yellow pad of what the thought might be, and how it might be useful to the meeting.

Then I wait to see if anybody else brings up the thought, because I think one of Peter's basic acknowledgements in Bill Thomas was, I was looking for credit. Credit was not important. The sharing was important, and the learning was important.

That was the wise counsel this priest was giving me, as he sewed that into me, and followed up with me. Guess what? Year after year after year. So here I am, I'm at the meeting, I've written it down, and all of a sudden, this great idea has not come into the meeting.

Now, I have an opportunity. Remember, the one with ears should listen, or as we used to teach in scouts, there's a reason why you have two ears and one mouth, to listen twice as hard. And so in this moment, I now can make a decision as to whether or not the meeting is ready to hear the idea.

And if they're not, I hold onto it, and I keep it. So there are two moments here. I don't want to take credit for this in case somebody else brought it up.

That's a good thing, finally, for a high ego person. And secondly, it's a good thing to not bring it in if not ready. However, if what the observation or thought I had was important enough that I thought it should come into the meeting, it could be something about a social justice piece, or dealing with a money problem that we just were not facing well.

You can think of all the things that just happen from within church life alone. Now, when I bring it into the meeting, since I've done, in essence, a brief outline of the thought, it's come out of the energy of my mouth, down my arm, through my pen on a piece of paper, and when it comes back up, it's in a much better place for me to bring it out with some form of brevity, just enough to see if others can begin to hear what I'm saying, and find their own way to respond to it, without it sounding, myself being manipulative over them. And now we have a richer discussion.

And it's another way of saying, maybe we'll come to a greater idea, and it's no longer mine, but ours, and who knows, maybe it started from God in the first place, and this is the only way I can get it out of me, and be God's mouthpiece for the one who sowed something in that particular moment. And then it would go from there. That basically describes the yellow pad, and that basically describes the gift that Peter Fleming gave me when he was not afraid to tell me something that I needed to hear, but didn't know I needed to hear.

And he told it to me in such a way that I could hear it. And I think that when we are at our best as sowers, we're both being extravagant and sharing it all over the place, but when we are listening carefully to God and sharing God's love, we then find a way to appropriately share what we're to sow, even if it's in a one-on-one situation, so it can be heard, remembering that in the end, I, you, we are not the important one. The important one is the love of God that is flowing through us in these moments.

Listen, he or she who has ears, listen. And I simply close with a grateful heart to a wise priest who took me under his wing and sowed something in me, and I feel as if I brought some of his wisdom here to Oriental today.

All these words I offer in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.