

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 13:10-17 and 1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Sermon Title: "Blessed Are Eyes and Ears That Truly Get It"

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Magicians have always fascinated me. Harry Houdini, David Copperfield, Harry Blackstone, and even some of the strange stuff that David Blaine does. How do they cut people in half? How do they pick the right card from the deck? How do they escape the container full of water? I always wondered if there was some true magic they were pulling from, some spiritual force that caused them to do things that mere mortals cannot. And then, I watched a program about how magicians pull off their tricks. This one magician pulled the curtain back, so to speak, and let me in on those secrets. After watching the program, all those wonderful illusions to me were only clever tricks. Not grand illusions, not mystical forces of nature, just tricks. The magic is somewhat gone for me now.

Jesus comes forward as a mysterious man. He is unlike anyone that anybody has seen before. His presence, his words, his compassion attract people to him, but they cannot put a finger on what it is that is so attractive. "They were astonished at his doctrine:

he taught [people] as one having authority, and not as the scribes... They were all amazed, and they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What thing is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him'.¹ There was something magical about Jesus, so to speak, and he was completely different from everyone else.

But Jesus never allowed himself to be mysterious and distant. He never assumed to hold onto something that only certain people could understand, while the rest would just have to deal with ignorance. Jesus pulled back the curtain, and allowed people to see those secret things of God. Anybody may be able to approach and witness the mysteries of God that Christ reveals to us. "There is nothing covered that will not be revealed," he once said, "and [nothing] hidden that will not be known... I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world."²

But the disciples approach Jesus in Matthew 13, and they ask, "Why do you speak to [us and others] in parables?" A parable is a very effective teaching tool. It is a plain tale that reveals hidden mysteries about

¹ Mark 1:22, 27.

² Matthew 10:26 and 13:35.

God and us. Frederick Buechner defines a parable as a “small story with a large point.”³ We may read any parable in the Bible, and although it takes a minute to read, we may spend hours upon hours trying to unlock the spiritual lessons they offer. Jesus speaks in parables, just as the rabbis and scribes would speak to their students. When the prophet Nathan wanted to get King David’s attention, and reveal how he sinned by killing the soldier Uriah and taking Uriah’s wife as his own, Nathan spoke a parable about sheep and rich owners and poor farmers.⁴ King David got the hint right quick. So parables are effective tools in revealing deep spiritual matters.

But the disciples in Matthew 13 seem to say that Jesus’ parables are not effective. They are too strange to understand. They seem to go above their heads, so they lose their ability to teach anything. “Why do you speak to us and others in parables?” they ask. “Wouldn’t it be better just to speak plainly, and then we’ll get the point.”

Jesus responds by saying, “[I speak in parables,] because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.”⁵ These parables are not lofty tales about deep spiritual stuff that you could never grasp, Jesus is saying. These parables of mine

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, 80.

⁴ Cf. 2 Samuel 12.

⁵ Matthew 13:11.

are the keys to unlocking the mysteries. These parables help to pull back the curtain, so you may see what God is doing throughout creation. And the disciples and everyone who wants to follow Christ have the Teacher of the parables himself: Jesus. He is the parable-giver and the parable-explainer. He is somewhat like the magician who pulls off a trick and let us in on how he did it. Unlike the magician, though, Jesus doesn't pull off tricks. He comes to save lives. He comes to open us up to the deeper things of God, once hidden from view but now revealed to all, and he calls us to dive in and bathe ourselves in those grand mysteries. As we do, we are recreated, restored, regenerated as whole human beings. "What we have, more is given to us," Jesus says, "an abundance to overflowing."⁶

Years later Paul would visit various towns, and those denizens (townspeople) would wonder about the newcomer. Just as with Jesus, the people asked about Paul, "What is this new doctrine, this Jesus that he speaks about?" It was new. It was different. It was mysterious. The Corinthians lived in a world of philosophy that searched the cosmos for answers. They thought their philosophy could plum the depth of understanding, like a bucket reaching the bottom of a

⁶ Matthew 13:12.

cavernous well, and pull out water for people to drink. However, the Corinthians believed that only some people could drink the water. Not everyone could. Only the especially smart people had wisdom to understand their profound philosophy. Everyone else had to muddle about.

Paul comes to the Corinthian people, and tells them they he never assumed anything. In weakness, in fear, in trembling, Paul comes to the people with the same curiosities, the same questions about life, the same confusion that causes him to muddle about from time to time. We can be sure that Paul thought he could plum the depths of religion and understand all things. But he came up short as a Pharisee. He came up short, when he tried to arrest all Christians and tried to eliminate their religion. It is not until Jesus pulled back the curtain for him, and revealed the true nature of God, that Paul was able to see and hear and understand.

So, Paul says that he comes to the Corinthians not with great human wisdom or fantastically flowery words. He comes with a simple message that contains great power. Jesus Christ and him crucified. There was once a cross on a hill. There was once a good man, the Perfect Man, God's own Son, who was nailed to that cross. He committed no crime. He never hurt anybody. People just wanted to get rid of him. But it

was God the Father's plan to put him on a cross, innocent as he was, so that through his crucifixion our sin would be eliminated. Our bodies and minds and spirits would be made whole through the death and resurrection of Christ. Simple message, simply put, but holding long-lasting results. People may now see God anew. They may hear his words afresh. They may become reborn, restored, regenerated.

“We do not speak with the wisdom of this age,” Paul says. We do not come to you with flashy advertisements, displaying sexy women and men in little clothing. We do not come to you with dollar bills falling from the sky, promising great wealth and security for the rest of your lives. We do not come with the possibility of winning some musical contract and becoming as popular as Justin Bieber or Miley Cyrus. We come, Paul says, to pull back the curtain. We come to reveal God's wonderful truth, so the scales may fall off your eyes, so the wax may fall from your ears.

Nobody knows this truth by their own efforts. No amount of money, no amount of security, no amount of power, no amount of popularity will unlock the mysteries that God holds. God reveals them the power of the Holy Spirit, which the same Spirit that anyone of us may know. The mysteries that God knows are the

mysteries we may know through Jesus Christ. Just take a peek behind the curtain. Let Christ pull back the curtain, so we may taste and see, and even listen to, the goodness of God, so we may bathe ourselves in all those spiritual wonders and become reborn, restored, regenerated.

But there are those verses that cause us to take a step back. We read that not everybody may get what God reveals. Not everyone sees and hears. Jesus says in Matthew 13, “You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.”⁷ That is troubling, partly because we hope we aren’t one of those types of people. But also because when we may be “get it,” the person next to us might not. Something is holding them back.

This is the reason why: “For the hearts of this people have grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes have closed.”⁸ Their hearts have grown dull with the mysteries of God. Life, for some people, has to be constantly exciting. For all the stories we hear about Hollywood celebrities, some would think that they have to be on a grand adventure with parties and travel and luxury, not stuck in their ordinary, humdrum lives. Some people always want

⁷ Matthew 13:14.

⁸ Matthew 13:15.

something to post on Facebook to prove that their days are more adventurous than their friends'. Some want life to be exciting for themselves, not for God. They want to be somebody who always has a great story to tell.

And then Christ stands before them. He holds the edge of the curtain of life, and he chooses to pull it back for them to see the mysteries of God. And these adventurous types cross their arms at what they see, and they say, "That's it? Isn't there more?" They roll their eyes, and they say, "Meh. I could do better." Their hearts are so dull. Jesus seems to say that their hearts are covered with thick fat, unable to let anything through, unwilling to let anything touch their hearts so they might be transformed.⁹

The youth are going on a trip to Costa Rica this summer, and it is going to be a great adventure. A great adventure accomplished to the glory of God. God will get the credit for what we do on that mission trip. We hope God will be revealed by our compassion words, by our sympathetic actions. We hope the curtain will be pulled back a little more for us and for those we serve, and our worldview will be changed, and we will be better people for God's sake.

We do not and cannot go to Costa Rica with dull hearts. In fact, we go because we have seen the

⁹ The Greek word is *pachuno*, which may mean "to make thick" or "to make fat, fatten."

mysteries of God, if only just a few of them, and we didn't cross our arms. We heard what God promises for those who believe, and we didn't make caustic comments. We were touched to our very core. Our hearts skipped an extra beat.

We have seen the mysteries of God: what God may do with broken lives, shattered by sin. We read how Christ touched many broken people in the Gospels – how he picked up the pieces and mended them together – and he still does the same thing today. He still mends lives, mends relationships, mends worship, mends compassion and service. Christ still makes all things whole again.

We have heard about the mysteries of God. We have heard the stories in Scripture about God sending his only Son to us, so that none would perish but have everlasting life. We heard the Christmas story about two months ago, and we know that story of old becomes fresh to our ears every Advent season. We know the birth of Christ leads to the death of Christ, which leads to the resurrection of Christ, which leads to our new life, partially here on earth but in its entirety there in heaven.

“Blessed are the eyes that see,” Jesus says.
“Blessed are the ears that hear. Many prophets and righteous people desired to see and hear what we have

seen and heard.” “God has revealed so much to us through the Holy Spirit,” Paul says.¹⁰ The mysteries of God are freely given to you and me.

We have seen and heard, and we want to continue to see and hear more. We want Christ to pull back that curtain even farther, every day. We want any remaining scales from our eyes and hearts to fall away, and any remaining wax to break apart, so that we may experience God without interruption.

¹⁰ Cf. Matthew 13:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 2:10, respectively.