

“Secrets”

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God's secrets are for disciples.

Luke 8:1-15

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Secrets and ears

I changed my sermon title after submitting it for the church bulletin, in part because I finished two books after submitting my first sermon title. I finished reading Austin Allran's first novel, *The Legend of the Isle of Cats*. The last 40 pages or so reveals some secrets about the plot and even the author that Austin was withholding until the end. They are for the most part happy secrets.

I also finished an audio book I've been listening to for six weeks or so. If you have been at Corinth during that time, you've heard me talk about it. It's titled *The Secret Life of Groceries*. "Secret" is even in the book title. One of the final chapters is about the secrets of the shrimping industry. Those are some ugly secrets, although the author does go on to tell about some reforms in the industry across the last decade.

Every book has secrets to reveal – happy or ugly, imaginary or factual. Every person, every family, every institution has secrets. Some secrets, but not all, need to be exposed. People do have a right to keep some things secret. Nobody tells everything.

What does this have to do with Luke 8? It's really about Secrets. Look at verse 10. "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables...." It bothers many of us, maybe all of us, that God has secrets he won't reveal to everyone. Why is that a surprise? We all have secrets.

The great thing about God's secrets is that you can know more of them if you have ears to hear. Secrets are for disciples. Get closer to Jesus and you'll understand more of his secrets.

Plot secrets

It would be tempting but unwise to skip over verses 1-4. Why? This is one place where we learn one of the secrets in Luke's unique angle on the story of Jesus. There are four gospels; the first three are quite similar, but Luke has a perspective the others don't share. Luke is writing Volume 1 of Jesus' story. Volume 2 is the book of Acts.

In the book of Acts, women take a prominent role in the church. They're explicitly included among the 120 disciples who wait and pray for the Holy Spirit's coming. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter quotes from the prophet Joel that both "sons and daughters will prophesy." Women in the book of Acts are property owners and entrepreneurs, and in the church evangelists and teachers. Luke is a careful historian and skillful writer, and he wants to sow seeds of his plot.

All of the Gospel writers depict women at the cross and as the first to encounter the empty tomb, but only Luke gives prominence to as many women in the story of Jesus' life – his aunt Elizabeth, his mother Mary, the sister of Lazarus who sat at his feet learning from him, and this group of women in Luke 8. This is no accident.

At Corinth we recognize there are different views among Christians as to the role of women in leadership and teaching, especially in the church. Our basic approach is that we can agree to disagree, but this is not one of the essentials of the Christian faith. But we also have to make choices as a congregation, and we have chosen to follow this pattern Luke shows us – that women are also called by God to serve, lead, and teach, and the church is better off when we partner fully with all those God has called to our congregation.

Luke has been showing us for several chapters the diversity of Jesus' closest followers – where they came from, how they met Jesus, what their political views are. Now he's making clear that in addition to the Twelve apostles, women are traveling from town to town with Jesus, and they're not there to cook the food and wash the clothes. More than one has been "cured of evil spirits and diseases." The mention of "seven demons" that had come out of Mary Magdalene may be a symbolic number. Seven is the number of perfection. She had been "completely possessed." Joanna's husband is close to the wealthy, powerful, and terrible Herod. Susanna is so well known among Luke's readers that she needs no more introduction.

Why is this important to Luke's plot? Because this gospel of Jesus, both part 1 and part 2, are about expansion of God's kingdom and his reach to the whole world – not just the Jews, not just the religious, not just the boys, not just (fill in the blank). The way God changes the world is by changing individuals, including those previously excluded or marginalized. That's the plot, and now "more and more are coming" (4).

Farming secrets

Now we come to the parable itself. Based on what I've heard this week, we need to uncover some secrets here as well. Farming secrets, in this case. Jesus uses his outside voice: "A farmer went out to sow his seed...."

The sower in this story seems at first glance to be somewhere between inept and inefficient. Doesn't he know how much seed he is wasting? Not if you know his secrets.

Jesus' first century listeners would not have found this story odd at all. What Jesus is depicting is a winter grain harvest. There are two basic seasons in Palestine – hot and wet. The hot season is also dry, and most of the ground hardens at first and then becomes dusty. Late in the hot season, the farmer scatters his seed, then plows it under. Scattering first, then plowing, then the inevitable rain creates germination.

A sower who took care that he scattered seed only where it was sure to flourish would be penny-wise and pound-foolish, like an advertiser who would only market to people 100% sure to buy. In an effort to use all his available soil, he would sow some seed "along the path" – but the process would inevitably result in a few seeds falling on the path itself, where it would be trampled and eaten by birds. Other seed would fall on a thin layer of soil with a rocky under layer. Close to the surface, those seeds would sprout first, but would be unable to establish deep roots. Some seed would also fall in places where there was a dormant thorny weed that would also sprout when the rains came, choking the plant.

The sower knew there would be some seed lost for all those reasons, but no matter – he knew the seed that fell on fertile, deep, rich, weed-free soil would more than make it all worth his while, producing a bumper crop. Everyone in Jesus' audience knew the secrets of farming.

What they weren't expecting was his punch line: "Whoever has ears to hear, listen up!" That's his last line with the outside voice.

Then he switches to his inside voice. I don't know if the crowds were still there or not, or whether they were trying to eavesdrop. But he's no longer talking to them. He's directing his teaching especially at those women and men who most closely connected to him and he says, "God has secrets. I'm not telling everyone these secrets, just you. Secrets are for disciples."

Parable secrets

He then does something he rarely does, even with his disciples. He explains the parable secrets, uncovers the mystery.

In my office there is a stained glass window based on this parable. It originally hung in the downtown Corinth, so it's about 115 years old. The focus of the window is

the sower, but I find it striking that Jesus never even mentions the sower when he explains the meaning of the parable.

What I love most about my stained glass is the seed, which you don't even see without the backlight. To me, then, that light represents the work of the Holy Spirit, who illuminates the seed, which is the word of God according to Jesus.

Here's how Jesus explains the secrets in this parable. If Jesus tells you "the meaning of the parable," listen closely. Remember, this is a secret. And it's for disciples. If you don't get it, keep listening, keep following, get closer.

The seed is the word of God. Don't over interpret that. He's not telling them to pick up their Bibles and read them daily. There is no "Bible" yet – not in the sense that you have it. People don't have bound copies of 66 books.

The "word of God" is what God says. The phrase will come to mean so much more than they knew. John will tell us that Jesus is the "word of God." For now, the lesson for disciples is that when God speaks, it's like scattering seed. Where will it land?

The seed lands in four places, each of which represents people who hear the word. Some seed fell...

- Along the path. The devil prevents faith by stealing the word.
- On the rock. They receive and believe, but they don't endure testing.
- Among thorns. They fail to mature because of competing priorities.
- In good soil: Unlike the Path, they retain. Unlike the Rock, they endure. Unlike the Thorns, they produce a crop.

I've often heard it said, and often said, that this should be called the parable of the soils. And while it's true that it's more about where the seed lands than it is about the sower or the seed, I find it interesting that the word "soil" is only used for the fourth landing place: good soil. The others are called Path, Rock, and Thorns.

God's secrets

What secrets are hidden and revealed in this parable?

Secret #1: Disciples watch their eyes. Pastors have secret conversations about preaching. We help each other before we stand in front of you. How much of what I say is from me and how much is from one of my colleagues is a secret.

One of the internal debates we preacher types have about a passage like this is whether it is descriptive or prescriptive. Is Jesus describing how things are or telling us how to respond? I think it's mostly descriptive.

Luke has been describing so many reactions to Jesus. Some hate him. Some are apathetic. Most love his miracles and might even be enthralled by his teaching. But you look around, and it seems the crowd is always changing. Yes, there's another big crowd today, but is it the same crowd as yesterday? They come and go.

As a story teller, Luke is setting you up for a part of the story common to all four gospels – that this crowd will dramatically thin into almost nothingness. They will almost all walk away when Jesus doesn't fulfill their expectations. Some will be hard hearted, others shallow, still others distracted as life goes on.

Disciples, watch your eyes. Don't be looking at *them*. And don't be surprised. This is just how it is. Celebrate and respond to the crowd when they're there, but here's the secret: What God is doing is so much bigger than the size of the crowd.

Jesus quotes Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah had seen the Lord, high and lifted up, in all his holiness and glory. God had asked, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah responds, "Here I am, send me." God says, in so many words, "Great! It sounds obvious to you, doesn't it, that if you see God you say, "I'm in." In words that Jesus repeats in Luke 8, God tells Isaiah, "These people will 'see' but still be blind."

What's going on? The rejection of the people in Isaiah's day led to the coming of Jesus. The rejection of the Jews in Jesus' day led to the cross, which in turn opened the door for you as Gentiles. If the Jews had wholeheartedly welcomed Jesus, I don't think their next step would be, "Hey, let's get the Gentiles included too!" There's a plot line to this story that's bigger than whoever is responding at the moment, and much bigger than how big the crowds are. Watch what you're watching.

Secret #2: Disciples protect their heart. There has to be some prescriptive in here as well. Jesus says the good soil represents those "with a noble and good heart." He must be saying to his disciples, "That's the kind of heart I want you to have."

Some of you are going to leave here unchanged in the same way that Jesus' original listeners did. This teaching isn't for hard hearts, shallow hearts, or distracted hearts. If you are on the fringes overhearing, you really shouldn't expect to get it.

It's interesting that the Rock describes people who "receive the word with joy." It's the only one of the four landing places described with either the word "receive" or "joy." They look so good, spiritually speaking. But there's no root system. That's the heart, the inside, the invisible part. It's a place nobody can go except you and God. How much do I want him, what he wants, what delights him?

The Thorns are also about Heart. "Life's worries, riches and pleasures." It's about what happens now, what happens next. It's a heart issue. What am I really living for? Again, though, it's about my heart. It's not my place to evaluate someone else's heart. I don't want to be one of those who falls away or fails to mature.

Secret #3: Disciples train their ears. The closest thing to prescription in this passage is when Jesus says, “Those who have ears to hear, listen up!” Pay attention!

It’s easy with a parable to lose the big point in the details. Why does God let the devil snatch the word? Is Jesus saying that only 25% of seed falls on good soil? What’s the fruit? It’s not a problem to discuss these details, but it’s definitely a problem to get lost in them. Jesus doesn’t want you focused on the devil or even the fruit, except for this: the fruit is a pair of healthy ears, tuned into God’s word.

Like every part of the body, there’s **more to ears** than meets the eye. There are secrets to the human ear. There are two primary functions of ears – hearing and balance. The hearing itself is complex, with outer ear, eardrum, middle ear, ossicles, inner ear, stereocilia, and nerve fibers that connect all that to the brain. But there are also fluid-filled canals inside the inner ear that signal your brain to keep your balance.

I’m sure Jesus’ listeners didn’t know that much about ears, but he did. He keeps it simple. Here’s a secret you need to know. Use your ears. If you have ears, ask why God gave them to you. They’re not just receive sound waves.

Shhh. Drown out the noise – of the devil, of testing, or worries, riches, and pleasures. If you want in on the secrets, train your ears to hear God’s word. How do you do that? You never will if you don’t watch your eyes and protect your heart.

This Lenten season, we’re giving you a new tool to train your ears. This little book was Pastor Lori’s idea. She showed me a copy early in the week and by midweek I had ordered 100 more. You can download it for free. It’s simple, like Brother Lawrence was. He was a 17th century monk who never intended to write a book. He just loved being in the presence of God and answered a friend’s letters about what that looks like.

If you want to know how to train your ears to God’s word – meaning the Bible but so many other ways God speaks to us – read Brother Lawrence. Here’s one of my favorite Brother Lawrence quotes:

The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.

In other words, listening to God doesn’t require you to stop being a Mom or a doctor or a businesswoman or a salesman or an assembly line worker. *The Practice of the Presence of God* teaches us one of the great secrets of Christian living – tuning into and talking to God in the midst of, well, anything.

Those who have ears to hear, listen up! Amen.