

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

How far is it between heaven and hell? What distance are we looking at? A thousand miles? A million miles? More than that? Many would say that there is no possible way of knowing. But actually Jesus tells us in our text for today. We learn that the distance between heaven and hell is approximately twelve inches...because that is the distance between our ears and our heart. Jesus preached the parable of the Sower and the Seed. He spoke about the four types of soil: the hardened path, the rocky ground, the thorny ground, and the good soil. When He finished telling the parable, He said these words: "He who has ears, let him hear." The difference between spending eternity in heaven and in hell has much to do with which soil lies between our ears and our heart. You have ears. You have a heart. Listen carefully, therefore, to Jesus' words; they are for you.

There are those who do not listen carefully, or they do not listen at all. It's pretty evident which soil lies between their ears and heart—it's a hardened path. When the sower sows the seed of God's Word in church, they are busy tuning him out. The Word of God reaches their ears. They hear the pastor's sermon. But the seed of the Word never enters their heart. The path from their ears to their heart has become hardened over time. As a result, they refuse to apply the Word of God to themselves. They may have been in church Sunday morning, but you couldn't tell. Satan takes the Word of God away from them before it is able to travel to their heart and make a difference in their life. They may shake the pastor's hand on the way out of church and even say, "Good sermon, Reverend." But they're just being cordial. They have no intention of living by the Word they heard that morning. They have no intention of trusting completely in that Word of God. And they have no intention of faithfully returning to hear that Word week after week.

There are also those who hear the Word of God in church but the pathway from their ears to their heart is rocky ground. These people have the best of intentions, but they rarely follow through. There is no depth of soil within them. They hear the Word and they like what they hear, but God's Word is not able to take root within them. They become offended easily at the pastor or at other church members. The problems in their life cause them to lose sight of God's promises to them. They often live with guilt because they have not taken God's word of forgiveness in Christ to heart. There are simply too many rocks in the soil between their ears and their heart.

Then there are those who hear the Word of God in church but the pathway to their heart is soil which is full of thorns and thistles. These hearers may know the Bible well. They can recall many of the Bible stories they learned when they were younger. It's not that they dislike hearing the Word; it's that the cares and pleasures of the world have taken over their life. When they're given the choice of hearing the Word of God or relaxing in leisure activities, they usually choose the cares of the world over God's Word. When it's time to give an offering to the Lord, most often they have only a few leftovers to give Him because they first spend their dollars on themselves and what they want in life. The soil within them is not very good. It's full of thorns and thistles. They live for the world more than they live for the Lord.

But then Jesus tells us that there are hearers of the Word and the pathway to their heart is good soil. What they hear, they believe. They think about what they heard in church as they go through the week. They apply what they heard to their life and they put God's

Word into practice. These hearers know that everything in life depends on hearing the seed of the Word. They put nothing, therefore, in the way of hearing that Word. They do not “live for Saturday night,” for they want to be well-rested on Sunday morning so that they are able to hear God’s Word with attentive ears. They do not plan activities which would keep them and their families away from the place where the sower is sowing the seed of the Word. God’s House is their “second home.” They delight in giving their offerings to the Lord here. They count it a privilege to support the sowing of the Word of God.

These hearers do not see themselves as better people than others. They would agree with St. Paul that they are “chief among sinners.” Yet they believe the Word of God in Christ that they are forgiven and declared holy and innocent in the sight of God. These hearers do not worry about where they will spend eternity, not because they have a false hope, but because they trust in their Savior, Jesus Christ. They believe His words that heaven is theirs not because they deserve it, but because it is a gift of His grace to them. These hearers are regularly found at the Lord’s Table. They have the desire to eat the Sacrament of Christ’s body and blood for they know that in His flesh and blood there is, for them, the blessings of eternal life. They keep coming back to His altar for they know that faith can be lost, and they need in the Sacrament the strengthening of their faith.

These hearers gladly bring their infants to Jesus in Holy Baptism, and they also gladly bring their baptized children to church with them week after week. They do not want the soil between their children’s ears and hearts to become hardened, rocky, or full of thorns. They work hard to keep their children’s soil, good soil. They don’t give Satan a chance. They faithfully keep their promise and with God’s help raise their children in the nurturing Word of God.

Friends, on July 13, 2008 at Christ Lutheran Church in August, Missouri the sower went out to sow. The seed of God’s Word is in your ears. Can I cause it to travel to your heart? No, the sower can only sow. But as he sows he rejoices knowing that God will work, as He pleases, through the seed of the Word. Can the sower prevent the devil from snatching the seed away from you? No, he can only sow. But with God nothing is impossible. You may remember how hard your soil used to be. At one time in your life and mine, the path from our ears to our heart was a hardened path, but by the grace of God, He softened that path bringing His Word into your heart. Can the sower remove the rocks from the soil within you and me? No, he can only sow. But all things are possible with God. Out of a compassionate heart, He has the power to break up the rocks in your soil and mine, and plant deeply within you His Word of Salvation. Can the sower get rid of the thorny ground in your life and mine? No, he can only sow. But with God all things are possible. By the power of His Word He is the One who draws you and me away from the cares and pleasures of the world to His love for you in Christ Jesus.

Remember, friend, we know this parable as that of the Sower and the Seed, not as the parable of the Four Types of Soil. Do not, therefore, focus on yourself. Do not fret about which type of soil you were, or are right now. Focus on the seed of God’s Word. The power is not within you; it is in the Word of God. And no matter how poorly you and I have treated His Word in the past, know this—His Word is still for you today. Your heart and mine may be stony, but God’s heart is full of mercy toward you. He does not hold your sins against you; He forgives you. The path to your heart may have been hardened when you walked in that door this morning, but Jesus walked the hard path to Calvary for you,

and He was nailed to a hardened cross in your place. Friend, He died for you. Thorns may be infesting your soil and mine right now causing you to neglect your Savior, but that does not change the fact that He was crowned with thorns for you. He denied Himself the pleasures of the world and wore that painful crown, and because He did, God looks with love upon you. He does not reject you for your sins; He forgives you. And He will not ever stop inviting you, through His Word, to live day after day in Christ your Savior.

Which ever kind of soil lay between your ears and your heart last month, or last week, or one hour ago, does not change this truth: Jesus Christ is your Savior; He died for you. You have ears, and you have a beating heart. God's gracious Word of love and forgiveness is for you today. May that Word today and always be planted in good soil within you, for Jesus 'sake. Amen.