

## Sermon: “Listen To Understand” Deacon Kellie

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July 26, 2020

During my first semester in college, part of my class schedule included a required Freshman Composition class. In this class we had weekly short writing assignments and a larger, assigned topic term paper. Because I had been fortunate to attend a high school that prioritized grammar, essay-writing, and written communication in general, I felt pretty confident when I started this class that I had a good knowledge base and could do well in the course - which was a nice feeling to have when everything else associated with going away to college had me confused and intimidated.

For the term paper project, the professor assigned me the topic of Jack Kerouac and his book "On the Road." I had heard of Jack Kerouac, but I didn't really know anything about him or about his semi-autobiographical novel. For my research, in those pre-Google days, I went to the library and checked out a couple of books on Kerouac as well as a copy of "On the Road," and skimmed through all of the resources, pulling out some facts here and there and thumbing through the novel to get its basic plot. My schedule was pretty full with other classes, work, and sports, so this was all I decided I could devote to preparing for this assignment, but when I turned in my paper to the professor, I felt pretty good about the finished product. As part of this major assignment, each student met individually with the professor after he had a chance to review our first draft. When I sat down for my review, the first question the professor asked me was, "Did you actually read 'On the Road'?"

“Well, I didn't read the whole book," I explained, "but I did read parts of it." That sounded feeble even to me, but I wasn't about to try to fake my way through a face-to-face discussion with my professor, even though I belatedly realized that was in essence what I had done with my paper. My professor obviously knew what I'd done before even asking the question. In addition to other grammatical and structural corrections we discussed, he instructed me to go back and read "On the Road" in its entirety before editing my paper and submitting the final copy, which I did.

Of the many lessons I learned in college, this has been one of the most valuable, but it is also a lesson that I have had to learn over and over again. Once I sat down and read "On the Road," I saw how only bothering to read a paragraph here and there, pulling a fact or detail out to support the theme of my paper, left me with the impression that I understood the topic and could speak on it, but the truth was that I didn't really know as much as I thought I did, and much of what I thought I knew was wrong. My finished paper was very different from my first draft after I devoted time reading Kerouac's entire work and paying attention to the full story he shared, instead of simply pulling out a few passages from the book that fit my purposes and filling in the rest with my assumptions

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and opinions. It took more of my time and attention to read the whole story, I only did it after being challenged to do more, but if I hadn't taken that extra effort my understanding would have been woefully incomplete.

Fast forward to the present day, when we not only have Google but also Wikipedia, 24-hour news outlets, online opinion polls, and numerous social media platforms with posts from friends and strangers alike on every topic imaginable. We can all feel like we are experts on just about everything, and if not experts, at least people who are confident in offering our opinions on all kinds of things. But with this glut of information, coming from different sources, not all of them reliable, and our often hectic daily schedules, combined with our tendency to filter out or not bother with information that doesn't align with the narrative we want, we can find ourselves thinking we are well-informed when we are actually closer to where I was in my professor's office, confident that we know enough, not realizing how much of the story we have missed.

Right now, there are so many topics and situations being discussed and debated in our society - from COVID-19 transmission and its testing, mask-wearing, and economic and social restrictions, to whether or not schools should begin their Fall semesters in person or online and how parents and educators will make their own choices, the impact of racism in our communities and in our nation, whether to engage in protests, what the most effective means of accomplishing lasting social change may be, whether to restart sports leagues and performing arts events and when it should occur, questions of what to do (or whether to do anything at all) about the people in our communities who were already vulnerable and struggling pre-pandemic and those additional people whose lives have been turned upside down by the fallout from COVID-related precautions, and, yes, determining when it's the best time to return to in-person worship services.

These are important questions and they all, I think, impact each one of us in large and small ways. They are also extremely complicated issues with their own particular challenges and limitations, and there are stories, details, advantages, and obstacles underlying all of them. How can we possibly do our own version of "actually reading the entire book" on even one of these topics, not to mention all of these and more? Is there a good alternative to the impossible task of trying to become an expert in everything so that we stay engaged in the world around us as we do our part as followers of Jesus for the kingdom of heaven?

For three Sundays in a row, our Gospel readings have included various parables - parables about sowers and seeds, wheat and weeds, yeast, treasure, fields, pearls, and fish. And as with all of Jesus' parables, they aren't about teaching those around him about

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farming or baking, fishing, investing, or real estate. He tells these stories to help his listeners understand truths about God's creation and what God wants for the world, and he instructs by using everyday settings that people around him recognize but are invited to see in new ways. He talks about a sower who doesn't give up when all of the seeds don't grow, a landowner who takes great care of his wheat even when weeds appear, a tiny seed that becomes a great, sheltering tree, a small amount of yeast used by a woman that makes bread enough for her community, and people recognizing something of such great value that they sell everything else they have to obtain the precious treasure.

Although some of these examples aren't from situations common in our modern world, it is not too difficult to see where Jesus' parables, which are based on activities familiar to the people of Jesus' time, are most likely at odds with what are considered practical and reasonable activities and choices. Wasting seeds in rocky or dry places, taking the chance that weeds will choke out good crops, and selling everything (absolutely everything) to get one thing that might be valuable but is impractical - these don't seem like very sensible actions. And when Jesus focuses attention on the tiniest of seeds and how much impact a bit of yeast can have, I'm sure the people of Jesus' day weren't any less prone to being impressed by bigger, better, and stronger over small and seemingly insignificant. I'm sure the response of many to Jesus' parables is something along the lines of, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I already know what you're talking about. I know what is right and what I should do."

It seems to me that this is why, throughout this parable-filled 13th chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells the gathered people over and over again to listen. "Let anyone with ears listen." Listen to the words of the kingdom, intending to understand. He cautions that there are many who hear the words but don't understand, who close their eyes against seeing what they don't want to acknowledge. We shouldn't just hear the words thinking we already know what they mean or only notice what we want to see. We must pay attention to the challenge offered to be part of the different, restored world that Jesus describes with his words.

Can we listen to the everyday situations in our lives, paying attention to where the words of Jesus apply today? Are there opportunities to hear the voice of Jesus speaking through the stories of the people around us whose life experiences are different from ours? Are we prepared to open our ears and eyes to recognize the ways our neighbors are hurting and struggling and be ready to truly understand their situations, possibly needing to let go of what we think we know? What are the rocky, barren, weed-filled conditions that challenge our ability to live hopefully and generously? Are there things we hold too

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tightly, not willing to let go to make room in our lives for the treasure that is the kingdom of heaven? What are the situations Jesus is calling us to see in new ways?

Whether we find ourselves ready, like Solomon, to ask God for an understanding mind and the ability to discern what is right or we are caught up in weakness, unable to pray but relying on the Spirit to intercede for us with sighs too deep for words, or ready like those who have heard Jesus' parables and are prepared to reply "Yes" to Jesus when he asks if we understand, it is always important to remember that we are not doing any of this alone. We journey along with other people, as we share our struggles and our stories, our support and our strengths. And everything we do, we do with God's help. God in Christ Jesus whose loving presence withstands death, life, angels, rulers, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, and anything else in all creation.

May we be prepared to look with our eyes, listen with our ears, and understand with our hearts, turning to put our trust in the restored, reconciled world Jesus offers. When we desire to do what is right, to take our place in the kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven, God is pleased.