

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
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Sermon Notes:

For a moment, picture the great lawn at Central Park. Imagine thousands of people coming to listen to a concert by Simon & Garfunkel. It was September 19, 1981. Five hundred thousand people were there. They filled the place. I was among them. And when they began to play their enigmatic songs, everyone listened. Some got the words and their meaning – like to Sounds of Silence. Some just listened to the music. Some, well, some still don't remember what happened that day. It was, after all, the early eighties. But one half million people showed up to listen to two musicians, phenoms in a city replete with musicians and wannabees. These guys were the real thing.

Speed backwards. First Century. The year was 30 in the Common Era, or close to it. There was a house where people had gathered to listen to the message of an itinerant preacher and some say miracle worker. They came for many reasons, but they came. The crowds got so large that there was no room, no way to address them all. And all had come to hear. He, they were told, was the “real thing!” *Watch* in your mind's eye as Jesus walks among them, to the boat by the lakeshore. Out he goes into the water, a few meters or more so he can see them all as they gather along the edge of the lake, so they can hear him as he speaks. And when he does speak, they fall silent and listen, Some get the words and their meaning. Some get something else. And others turn to others and say things like, “What did that mean?” or “What was that all about?”

Just as others have asked writers what their lyrics have meant; for example, many wonder who was “Rosie the queen of Corona” in *Paul Simon's Me and Julio Down by the School Yard*. Here's what one writer says happened when he asked Paul about the lyrics. He told me...

“... the song was "pure confection" and had no meaning to real people or events. It's just a catchy tune and he got a laugh out of singing the lyrics. In other words, there is no Queen Rosie. She's Queen only in song.

Corona, however, is a real place -- a neighborhood in Queens, New York, one of the five boroughs of NYC. Corona is known for being the long-time home of Louis Armstrong, the famous jazz musician. The name Corona means "crown" in Spanish and Italian, which makes Rosie "Queen of the Crown."

Somehow and in some ways the song and its lyrics meant something – even if the lyricist or poet had something different (or nothing) in mind. That happens all the times from commentaries to conversations. The meanings are as many as there are listeners.

Yet, Jesus was more than a poet or performer. Yes, he knew how to attract a crowd, he just did. But sometimes his words were hard to “get” or to understand. There are repeated references of the disciples asking Jesus what this or that meant; what was to come; and in this case, “Why aren’t you more direct and more clear, Jesus?” Or, as the evangelist reports it, “Why do you speak in parables.”

Well, Jesus did that a lot. His answer following to question about speaking in parables is nearly another parable itself, this time quoting prophecy and Isaiah – making it easier for some and more difficult for others.

Though seeing, they do not see;
Though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

Is it really so different from:

People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence

"Fools", said I, "You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows
Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you"
But my words, like silent raindrops fell
And echoed
In the wells of silence

It seems that Jesus’ disciples and audiences had the same human nature and traits of today’s, among them the need to know and fassst!

Tell us now:	You know not the time nor the place
What does it mean?	Seek and you shall find?
How will I survive?	Be not afraid.

Parables. Responses that offer no quick answers. Thorns that choke new growth. Rocky soil that provides no depth for roots. Good soil. Good growth.

Seeds – like silent raindrops – fall on all.

Am I the thorn?
Am I the rocky terrain?
Am I the rich soil?
Am I the raindrops, the seeds... c'mon, Jesus, could you just send me a memo?!

Questions seeking answers:

Is it about me?
Or is it about you – and me?
And, who am I in relation to you and
all these words that make no sense
they confuse me
they give me a glimmer of understanding for an instant
and then it is gone!

How could all this make a difference for me – anyway?! What does it all mean in the midst of life?!

my finances,
the Roman oppressors,
declining housing and benefits,
my health,
my relationships,
my ill or passed family,
friends,
my own human mortality.

Then...now...the cry is the same:

Heal me. Cure me. Help me. Please, someone help me.

Jesus heard these cries, much as we do today. We know of his great compassion, sometimes taught to him by others – as in the case of the Syro-Phoenecian woman who came to him for crumbs.

We know we have compassion for others, too. But is that enough? The world sometimes just seems to big and swirling in too many directions at once, from highs to lows, just in these days...

From the stunning verdict of the Casey Anthony trial
To the celebration of this day's new justice in the PC(USA)

From the uprisings in Syria
To the new democracy and world's newest nation in Sudan

To folk shaking a cup outside a subway
To those taking the train with 50,000 others to watch Jeter's 3,000th hit

To the approaching days of remembrance on the tenth anniversary of
9/11, just two months away.

A steady and growing beat, especially in this city and one that we
started to discuss last week, and will approach more as it nears. [Annie]

If so inclined to seek answers in spiritual ways to all these and more, who
wouldn't go to the lakeshore to listen to the promise and possibility of a modern-
day prophet, healer, one who touched us – even when we at first did not
understand?

I mean, Who does not want answers? The disciples did. I do.

And that begs the real question. Maybe the real question is not who has the
answers –

But who has let go of needing the answers?

When we do seek – but not seek answers; when we plant seeds – but not
need to know of the harvest; when we sing songs – and do not need to control
the message; when we pray – and do not need the outcome we pray for – but
just to pray – something happens to us.

It's a slow process, at least for me; but when I no longer have to resolve
everything and can accept that I may not understand much at all – but come to
know with every fiber of my being that I am loved – by taking the risk of believing
it to be so

When I realize that it is true that we all are ordained into life and purpose by God

Well – things happen.

Somehow –

The rocks don't matter.

The thorns do not hold me back.

The fertile soil is more than where things are planted.

It is where I grow and come to believe from inside

And through others who know the way

Jesus says as much:

It takes time...the seed falling on the path refers to those who at first hear the message but don't understand it – they don't take the time to stop and let it take root;

the seed on the thin soil among the rocks are like those who at first hear the message – the song – and hum and sing it over and over but along the way forget the tune, the words, even that it was...they don't take the time to let the song *be* in them – it is sung just for the momentary pleasure; and among the thorns...the word – the seed – choked by worry, unnecessary worry when we really know that you are loved by God, freed by God, ordained by God – from, of, and returning to God...true no matter what befalls us.

Friends, if that is not powerful...I haven't a clue what is. It is the power of God.

Be still. Know that I am God. Fear not. For I am always with you and **you** are with me.

And if there is such a thing as a “catchy tune” in how these scriptures and parables repeat themselves in our thinking – then the lyrics might be to take the time to stay with God through thick and thin; through seemingly barren paths or rocky terrains or thorny patches – its refrain promises a life of service and importance to others beyond any ways we might imagine. It also means that we ask for help, let others help us, and pray for those who are not ready for help. It means that knowing we are of God – invites us to be humble, discarding the things that keep us from love and one another.

For most of us there will be no roaring crowds as we crush our 3,000th hit. There will be no lawns filled with hundreds of thousands who come to us to hear us sing; and neither will there be shorelines of people hungry for our teachings and miracles.

But there will be one next to us crushed by events; there will be those who hear no songs that lift or touch them; there will be those, too, who will care not for the teachings of systems they still see as oppressive and draining of life.

There will however be our love, even our struggle to love sometimes, knowing that secrets and answers aside, it really is simple:

We are loved by God,
called to love God in return,
and one another in the same way.

Life, whatever else it may be, whatever blows it may deal us or heights to which it may raise us – the only thing that is lasting beyond everlasting is to learn to walk with God in all we do.

That, my friends, is the answer we need.
That is the kingdom of God.
At hand – on all paths, thorny or otherwise,
and in all times past or present.