

And that's an amazing harvest—even the thirty fold; because a “good” harvest for any farmer in Jesus’ day was just nine fold—nine bushels of grain for every bushel planted—that was the best hope of any farmer! The usual harvest was about seven and a half bushels for every bushel sown. With all the uncertainties that come with farming, ending up with the “usual” would be enough—it would be considered a good year; a farmer could be satisfied with the return on all the work it took to raise that crop. To experience a “good” return would be an occasion for great joy; a harvest that was well beyond what could be expected. The crowds Jesus was talking to would know what the “usual” return of a planted crop would be. Yields of thirty, sixty, or one hundred fold would sound like a fantasy—a dream with no possibility of becoming real.

Between five and six hundred years before Jesus, the Prophet Isaiah went about talking to the crowds too, sharing with them God’s own words; speaking to them as if it was God talking right to them. These were words for people who had stopped listening to God; people who had stopped honoring the way of life God had called them to live; people who lived as if they did not even know about God because they were worshipping other gods—idols and trees and sacred places—engaging in cultic practices that did not belong to them. The words Isaiah spoke were for people who thought they could earn God’s favor by their own cleverness; by their own design. They were words for people who had forgotten God’s call to them to take care of those in need; God’s call to stand up for those who had no rightful place to stand—had no voice of their own; people who had forgotten their God-given responsibility for widows and for orphans and for strangers who lived among them. They were words for people who were so caught up in their own lives and life around them that they had no time for their faith—for the faith of their fathers and mothers—the heritage that grounded the people of Israel as being the people of God established on this earth to be a blessing; to be an instrument of God’s blessing bestowed upon the nations around them. “I will bless the nations of the earth,” God had once told them, “through you.” It was a noble calling; but in Isaiah’s day, it was a forgotten way of life.

So, ‘way back there in the midst of Godly life up and forgotten in the Promised Land, God spoke to Isaiah and told him to tell all those people caught up in their own sense of self-importance: “Go, and say to this people: ‘Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” God wanted the attention of the people. It seemed like letting them go would be the strategy for getting them back.

Faith is a gift—an un compromised gift from God. It is given and we can do what we want to with it. Gift that it is, it entails a process—a process of “hearing” and “understanding.” Jesus often reminded the people to “hear;” *the one who has ears, let them hear*, he would say. Hearing is one thing; to let the information in; but understanding is quite another—especially as it was “understood” in the Old Testament, and therefore regarded by Jesus. “Understanding” as regards incorporating the faith that is given to us by God, is not a matter of “getting it;” not a matter of being able to wrap our minds around it and figure it out. *Understanding* as Isaiah was speaking to the crowds in his day, and *understanding* as Jesus continued that conversation with his disciples in his day and *understanding* as we listen in, in our day, has to do with taking something to heart; to bringing our full intention to commit our will...our whole way of

life to what we have “heard.” *Understanding* in this day and age is a fragile commodity for any to possess, in a world that clamors for our attention; in a world that has so much to readily offer.

*Understanding* with regards to the faith God blesses us to know, is not a mental exercise. It is a deep commitment of our lives to the way of life God calls us to. And that commitment comes with a regard for God that cannot be replaced by anything else. It all starts where God started when the people of Israel were chosen; there with the very first commandment—the one that is there to remind us that God alone is God. Every relationship with God begins there. Every commitment that takes root and grows begins there with the first of all “firsts;” “*Hear, O Israel,*” Moses called out to God’s people; “*the Lord our God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*” And that is where things begin to get “tough” for God’s people. That desire for God has a lot of competition in a world that is full of so many other things to do, and places to go. It’s all too easy to spread our lives thin; too easy to find we have no depth of “soil” in which to enrich the faith God has given us. Yes, we “hear.” The question is, what do we “understand?” As God’s people of faith, will we be a blessing to others; bearing fruit beyond the expected harvest as the wonder of God’s goodness is worked through us?

“Give me understanding that I may keep thy law and observe it with my whole heart.” That was a Psalmist’s conversation with God ages ago. The potential of the impact our lives of faith can have in life begins right there—with a regard for God that takes center stage—that essence of “understanding” Jesus pressed for. It is the essence of the parable of the sower—God first. Let it be the beginning of life and prayer for us. *You first, Dear God. In this life of faith you have given, may it ever be you, first. Amen.* It is there that we will begin to find “understanding;” begin to find our will drawn closer to God’s. It is there, that God begins to change the world bit by bit, through us; that God’s goodness can be known. Amen.

“You, first” Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 071308 Mkh