

Three months ago, my wife Sarah and I gave in and got a pandemic pup. We joined the thousands of others who thought it might be a good idea to get a K-9 companion during quarantine.

One of Camryn's favorite places to go is UB. UB is Camryn's perfect combination of few people and plenty of fragrances. I don't know anything about dog breeds but I swear Camryn is part beagle. When she sees a squirrel she lifts one paw up and lowers her shoulders, silently prowling towards her newest friend. Thank God she has not caught one of these "friends" just yet. Right before Camryn gives my shoulder a good rip with the leash, the squirrel always dashes up towards safety leaving Camryn trying to climb a tree.

Camryn will faithfully watch that squirrel for the next twenty minutes if I let her, but I'm not as patient as she is. "Camryn, come. Camryn, come here". Her ears perk up, so I know she hears me, but to her I am just not as interesting as that darn squirrel. Instead she stays planted, keeping us at a stand-still. My lovely little pup hears me but she certainly doesn't listen.

Listen! This is how Jesus starts and ends the parable of the sower. Listen. Jesus is adamant that we pay attention. That we don't let this story pass us by. That we take it in. So let's hear it once more.

A sower goes out to sow. He tossed seed liberally everywhere. Some seed fell on the path before and behind him and the birds were quick to pick it up. Other seed landed on gravel. It wasn't long before shoots popped up, but they didn't have the roots to sustain themselves and they withered in the sun. Other seed fell in with thorns, and as the grain grew up, it was

smothered. Many seeds landed on good, rich soil and yielded an abundant harvest. Some seeds giving a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen.

Why does Jesus keep telling us to listen? My hunch is because we don't want to hear what he has to say. It is not that this story is hard to grasp. What makes the story challenging is the question it proposes: Who are you? Before Jesus can finish the story, we think we are the good soil, naturally. But Jesus challenges this assumption. He asks us to pause and evaluate our lives. Because the truth is, we all have parts of each soil in us. As soil is not stagnant, neither are our lives. We shift and move, almost never neatly from one category to another. Instead we are parts that make up a whole. Always shifting, always transforming.

We are the hard path when we are unable to listen and receive. This is the vulnerable part within us. The part that has been walked on so many times that we begin to develop a hard exterior. This is our defensive self. Our fearful self. Unable to be challenged or changed.

We are the rocky soil when we are the bandwagon fan. This is the well-intentioned part within us. The part that has sympathy for what we hear, but can't sustain a true change. We do this when we bounce from issue to issue, but never make the problems of others personal. This is the part of us that pretends we are removed from the issues of injustice and violence.

We are the thorny soil when we hear the challenge, commit our lives, but become distracted by our own cares and concerns. This is the part of us that resonates with Camryn, as she is ultimately more interested in the issues of squirrels than the issues of others, aka her loving and gracious owners. Wealth, productivity, practicality smother the good word within us from yielding an abundant harvest.

And yes, we too are the good soil when we listen and grow and give. This is the part of us that moves towards empathy and love of neighbor. We are the rich soil when we truly listen and respond to the Word. When we live in ways of justice and peace, compassion and love, towards all God's creatures.

Jesus invites us to take an honest look at our lives. To see where we have traded the Word of God for a false sense of comfort. Jesus invites us to a reality where the Word decenters us and makes room for the other. Here in this listening and yielding comes forth a rich harvest. A harvest that gives out of its abundance.

Each season, each Sunday, each second, God invites us into a new way of life by showering us in possibility. If we would listen closely to our loved ones, our neighbors, our world, we might just hear his Word. We might move beyond defense towards compassion. We might move beyond ourselves towards community.

Please humor me with one last story about my dog. We only had Camryn for two weeks when Sarah took her down to Springville to help a friend at her farm. Camryn was on a line when she got spooked and somehow slipped her harness, running off frightened into the woods. I rushed to Springville to help look for Camryn. We wandered in woods and fields for over ten hours calling Camryn's name. We felt like the worst dog owners ever. We didn't know what to do so we posted on facebook, went door to door, called the local shelters, trying anything to find our pup, but we had no luck. It was getting dark and so we had to call it a night. We decided to sleep in our car in hopes that she would somehow find her way back to the farm. Around midnight we woke up to a phone call from someone saying they spotted Camryn

right across the street from where we were. We jumped out of the car and started calling her name, “Camryn, come. Camryn, come here”. Our hearts leapt when we saw her little head peak out from behind a planter. We were filled with joy as she came sprinting across the road into our arms.

Jesus reminds us that hearing is not enough. We need to take those first steps away from those false comforts so that we might get out of the woods and come back home. We are called to more than just hearing. We are called to listen and respond. Let us listen with open hearts to those around us and to the God who continually showers us with his Word, for the sake of the world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.