

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-9

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on September 27, 2020, the Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit; Heavenly Dove: Come kindle the flame of sacred love; in those cold hearts of ours.

One of the reasons we are drawn to Jesus as a human being and religious savior involves his words and his deeds, his teaching and his acts of power. Among his acts of power are miracles, healings, turning wine into water,¹ driving money changers from the Temple.² Among his teachings are the Sermon on the Mount³ and his parables.

We love his parables – because they are powerful stories – The Parable of the Prodigal Son,⁴ The Parable of the Good Samaritan.⁵ We identify with characters we find in them: a father grieving for his adolescent son who has left home; an early young adult who leaves home, blows a good portion of the inheritance he was scheduled to receive later, then comes back only because the bed is warm and the food available.

When Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John set out to write their Gospels – thirty to fifty years after Jesus lived – they were familiar with the forty-plus parables Jesus had told at different times and places. John decided not to use any of them. Mark used a few, but Matthew and Luke went to town on them. When their finished works – known as the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – came to be included in the book we know as the Bible, the Gospel of Matthew was placed first, even though Mark's gospel was a few years older. When Matthew put his Gospel together, the parable he decided to include first was the Parable of the Sower. Thus, when we start reading the New Testament with Matthew, the Parable of the Sower is the first parable we read. In addition to placing it first, Matthew thought this parable so important that he followed it with an *explanation* Jesus gave concerning parables⁶ and then with an *interpretation* Jesus gave of this parable.⁷

I.

The parable begins with simple words: "A sower went out to sow..."

¹ John 2:1-12.

² John 2:13-24.

³ Matthew 5-7,

⁴ Luke 15:11-32.

⁵ Luke 10:25-37.

⁶ Matthew 13:10-17.

⁷ Matthew 13:18-23.

In 1909, a fourteen-year-old boy, named Amos Wilder, was working on a farm in the Midwest one summer. In the village Sunday School he attended the one day a week he didn't have to work, he heard this parable. It captivated him. Sixty-three years later, he attributed it as the reason he made literature his life's work and eventually became a professor at Harvard.

A sower goes out to sow.

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I recently heard a woman in her nineties describe what she experiences every morning as she awakens: She opens her eyes, realizes she has at least one more day, rolls over on her side, drapes her legs over the side of the bed as she sits upright, puts her feet flat on the floor, being sure to balance them, then lets herself to stand. She gets dressed. Fixes breakfast. Begins the tasks and responsibilities of her day.

A sower goes out to sow.

II.

And as this sower sows, some seeds fall on the path; birds come and eat them up. Some seeds fall on rocky ground; they spring up quickly, but since they have no depth of soil, when the sun rises they are scorched and wither away. Other seeds fall among thorns, and the thorns grow up and choke the seeds.

If we do the math, three-fourths of what the sower sows does not take root. Three-fourths does not sprout into a plant. Three-fourths does not bear fruit. The sower goes out to sow, but only one-fourth of what the sower sows bears fruit. One-fourth. That's all.

III.

Other seeds [the parable continues] fall on good soil and bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

The sower goes out to sow, the woman lifts herself out of bed -- even though each knows that three-fourths of the seed they sow, three-fourths of the efforts they make will likely come to naught. Yet, they think perhaps *today is the day* that a *seed takes root and grows*.

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I was told many years ago that one of the great female writers in America of a hundred years or so ago once said, in response to a question about what routine she followed in her writing, said:

Every day, I get up, go down the stairs to my kitchen table, take a blank sheet of paper and roll it into the typewriter, sit down in front of it, without any earthly idea what I am going to write. But I do so because if today be the day that the muse will strike, I want to be in place.

A sower goes out to sow because today just might be the day that one of the seeds takes root. A hundred-fold, sixty-fold, thirty-fold.

IV.

Jesus concludes the parable with a comment: *Let anyone with ears, listen!* I prefer the translation from the King James Version -- less inclusive but more poetic and forceful: *Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.* Who hath ears to hear, let *them* hear. What are we supposed to hear?

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Are we supposed to hear that the life God intends for us, *above all else*, involves *human effort*? Does calling ourselves a Christian, being a follower of Jesus Christ mean getting up every day, putting our feet on the floor, going outside of ourselves, sowing seed, knowing all the while that most if not all of the seed in any given day will never take root? Is Jesus defining our purpose as making a human effort no matter the outcomes? Perhaps so. Effort. Every day. No matter the success or achievement. Effort.

But there has to be more.

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Closely related, are we supposed to hear from this parable that the life God intends for us, above all else, involves the *success* our efforts bring, the *achievements* that come our way when we go out from ourselves to sow?

The Parable of the Sower led the professor to speak of:

- the...*continuity* and *plenitude* of creation...
- [the] exuberance...[and] trustworthiness of existence...
- its plenitude and excess.

It sounds like he is saying that there is plenty of success and joy and achievement and accomplishment to be had for those willing to sow. The opportunities for growth and plenitude seem limitless.

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The 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire* featured two athletes competing in the 1924 Olympics: Eric Liddell: a devout Scottish Christian who runs for the glory of God, and Harold Abrahams, an English Jew who runs to overcome prejudice.⁸ The movie opens with a stirring tribute to human achievement which comes from the apocryphal portion of our Bible, not fully recognized as part of our scripture but part of our tradition:

Let us now sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.
The Lord apportioned to them great glory,
his majesty from the beginning.
There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,
and made a name for themselves by their valour;
those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;
those who spoke in prophetic oracles;
those who led the people by their counsels
and by their knowledge of the people's lore;
they were wise in their words of instruction;
those who composed musical tunes,
or put verses in writing;

⁸<https://www.google.com/search?q=chariots+of+fire&aq=chrome.0.0j46j013j46j012.3050j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

rich men endowed with resources,
living peacefully in their homes—
all these were honoured in their generations,
and were the pride of their times.⁹

It is a terrific poem celebrating human achievement, more readily now shared by women as well. But it raises the question: Is the Parable of the Sower implying that the purpose of following Christ is to know great achievements, to become “the pride of our times”? As valid as achievements are, are they the primary purpose of people of faith?

V.

I think not.

There is a little noticed “oddity” in the way this parable ends. It is found in the line describing the success of the seeds that take root.

We might expect the order of success to be described as going from an increase of thirty-fold to sixty-fold to a hundred-fold, each success building on the last. And we might accept the implication that numbers will continue to increase: two-hundred-fold, three-hundred-fold, five-hundred-fold. This appeals to our love for linear progress, uninterrupted growth, limitless opportunity.

But this isn’t the order Jesus uses. He uses, instead, a hundred-fold, then sixty-fold, then thirty-fold. It is as if the first success that breaks through to the seed is a tremendous burst, followed, by a slowdown, a steadiness, perhaps even a disappearance of fruit-bearing after a while.

Professor Wilder speaks of the parable as bearing witness to:

- *enigmatic vicissitudes of loss and gain*
- *strangely poised between trust and lack of trust*
- *being sustained in our ventures and anguished at our betrayals.*

Humanity’s “*relation to the earth* and its processes is...full of mystery,” he writes.

The Parable of the Sower is thus not simply about our *effort*, nor simply about any *success* we might meet. Rather, the parable is about mystery: the mystery of our putting ourselves forward, on this earth, in this life, in this day and time and culture in which we live.

- When we as sowers go out to sow, we never know what the outcome will be;
- And we’d best be cautious about equating our effort with expected results.

Ultimately, the interaction between seed and soil, effort and outcome, is a mystery, residing in the heart and hands mind of God.

⁹ Ecclesiasticus 44:1-7.

VI.

When the ninety-plus year old woman described lifting her eyelids, putting her feet on the floor, beginning her day, it was in answer to a question: *Can you point to a time in your life when you experienced God's grace to you?*

She answered that every time she awakens it is a gift of grace. That every time she stands up it is a gift of grace.

It is neither her efforts nor the tasks she completes that define her. It is the mystery of the gift of God's grace that enables her to go out from herself and sow seed that defines who she is, who God is, for God's grace has awakened us and enabled her to do that – in even a limited way – each day.

VII.

Philosopher Michael Sandel expresses concern that within the elite and educated sectors of our society we have so come our focus on effort and achievement – “a sower goes out to sow” – that we have fallen into an “insidious self-satisfaction” among the those of us for whom seed has borne plenteous fruit. In our minds, we have so earned the fruit of our hard work and education, that we have fallen into lacking respect or even appreciation for luck, positive circumstances of our upbringing, and public goods that have allowed our intelligence and hard work to blossom.

A perfect meritocracy *banishes* all sense of *gift* or *grace* [Sandel writes].

It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a *common fate*.

It leaves little room for the *solidarity* that can arise [with others] when we reflect on the *contingency* of our talents and fortunes.¹⁰

Sandel fears we have lost the capacity to say: “There but for the grace of God go I.”

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My friends, Sandel is speaking – perhaps directly – to many of us: Who despite all the crises in our nation today remain blessed with tremendous benefits of education and health care and meaningful work and leisure and arts and culture, even if much of this has now moved online, which for many of us had its advantages as well.

Yes, much of it we know and experience results from the efforts and achievements of “famous men and women” who have gone before us. Yes, much of it grows out of hard work and study we have put in. But is there not also an element of luck, of mystery, of contingency that has brought us the lives we know and cherish? Is it possible we have lost – or never quite acquired – a sense of “there but the grace of God go I”?

“Every time I awaken,” the woman says, “every time...it is a gift of grace.”

Amen.

¹⁰ Quoted in Spencer Lee Lenfield, in “No One Deserves a Spot at Harvard: Michael Sandel makes the case against meritocracy,” *Harvard Magazine* September-October 1920, available at <https://harvardmagazine.com/2020/09/montage-michael-sandel-against-meritocracy>. The book is Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1920).