

## The Sower Who Sows Seeds – and the Field Yielding the Sower's Crop

Matthew 10:12-14 and 13:1-9

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"A sower went out to sow." The Scripture we read this morning is one of the parables Jesus taught which, across the centuries, is "up there" in the "Parable Hall of Fame" with "The Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:30-37), "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15:11-31), and "The Lost Sheep" (Luke 15:4-7). The other three I have just now mentioned, though, appear only in Luke's Gospel account. The parable of "The Sower Sowing Seeds" appears in Matthew, in Mark (4:1-9), and in Luke (8:4-10). Any church or disciple group "worth a hoot" will teach that a parable which appears in three Gospel accounts like this one, surely deserves as much attention as a parable only appearing in one Gospel account, no matter how moving the parable is which appears in only one account.

Even so, for some followers of Jesus, "The Parable of the Sower" is somewhat like a toy left in one's "parable toybox" when other toys are lifted out to play with more frequently, or like a tool left on one's "parable toolbench" when other tools are utilized much more frequently. Since "The Good Samaritan" and "The Prodigal Son" and "The Lost Sheep" exert traction and power in my life, I honestly ask myself, "Why is 'A Sower Went Out to Sow' not like those other three? Why does 'A Sower Went Out to Sow' not immediately flash on the computer monitor of my mind as one that shapes my life and faith daily? Briefly, there may be two reasons for this parable being somewhat over-looked and under-valued.

One reason relates to presentation. The three Gospel accounts which include "A Sower Went Out to Sow," in later verses, all offer an interpretation of the parable and attribute the words of interpretation to Jesus. You may say, "Preacher, you're pitiful. The Bible here in all three books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke offers you an explanation in Jesus' own words, and you don't appreciate that?" (Matt.13:18-23; Mk.4:13-20; Lk.8:11-15). I understand if you think I am pitiful in this, but please hear me out. Remember how it's said, "Less can be more"? I think that is true for me in this. Jesus rarely is quoted as giving an explanation like this parable receives. I've discovered that if I read this parable in its "short form" without the section explaining it, its influence on me is much more substantial.

After "presentation" being a "hill I need to get over" in embracing this parable like I embrace my "top three," the second "hill" in front of me is "custom and comfort." Many Bible teachers and believers across the years have interpreted and taught this parable as their perspective on what we disciples of Jesus need to do and why we need to do it. For some across the centuries, "A Sower Went Out to Sow" represents a sort of "how to manual" of agronomy applicable to the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus: "Scatter the seed, Christian sowers; and you will discover that while your scattering may well have little effect in human lives that do not produce long-term results, you never know where the seed will fall into soil prepared and ready to yield bountiful produce." With all due respect to anyone's customary and comfortable interpretation of a parable like this one, I wonder if there might be an under-discussed angle of interpretation different from what certain others have said gives them motivation and meaning, which will leverage and guide my life still today in the direction Jesus' teaching and Jesus' life?

A crucial question, it seems to me, goes like this: If the "seed" of the Gospel sprouts in my life, which way do I turn? In the words of our "sending out" song this morning, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling," the suggestion to singers and hearers who are sinners is, "come home – all you who are weary – come home." I've tended to think across the years that "going home" meant turning back to the past; OR that it meant "going to heaven." Where is home? I currently think that "home" – as intended in the Bible and in the Gospel – is Jesus calling you and me and others forward in God's service in God's world. That's the direction in which we're called to move when the seed of the Gospel sprouts in our lives, and takes root, and grows to yield grain and seed for seasons beyond us. Turning "home" is turning forward in God's service in God's world.

When a disciple of Jesus – a newcomer OR a long-timer – senses that “home” means turning forward in God’s service in God’s world, what is seen and realized can be intimidating. Tod Bolsinger is a disciple of Jesus who has written, “Canoeing the Mountains” (2015). It’s about leadership considerations for communities of faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (If you think this seems a departure from “A Sower Went Out to Sow,” bear with me.) Bolsinger writes that Lewis and Clark, in 1803, were commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson to explore from the middle of the continent to the Western coast line. Part of that exploration assumed there was a waterway flowing west, which began just over the continental divide from the source of the Missouri River, which itself flows east, toward the Mississippi River. When William Clark’s advance team located the source of the Missouri River, they made their way up a ridge expecting to see a slope down toward the West, with the potential of another stream leading to a river not too far away flowing west toward the Pacific. Instead, they faced the rising immense slopes of the Grand Tetons, realizing they were not going to be able to canoe their way over those additional, more imposing mountains (pgs.26-27). When we human sowers of the Gospel realize not all places we throw seed will grow a bountiful Gospel crop, discouragement rises. So do we resign ourselves to canoeing around in the familiar streams among the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains? Or do we turn toward those newly discovered steeper slopes and find ways to meet the imposing challenge in front of us? And how might we meet imposing challenges for the future of ministry as Lewis and Clark faced in exploring the American West? If we know the Gospel of God’s love embodied in Jesus Christ creates “home” for us, turning forward in God’s service to face challenges which exist today and tomorrow is possibly very similar to seeing the Grand Tetons rising in front of us, when we had hoped to see a gentle slope downward.

Carlyle Marney was a Southern Baptist pastor and theologian, born in 1916, who died in 1978. Early in 1963, he said, in a lecture at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, that four aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry are powerfully relevant for our faith and discipleship every day. One is water. One is bread. One is touch. One is dust being shaken from one’s sandals and feet. All four of those are worthy of exploring more, but “dust being shaken from one’s sandals and feet” was an image, for Dr. Marney, of Jesus encouraging disciples to figure out if some aspect of life hinders moving forward in serving with Jesus’ ministry – toward “home,” as God’s Kingdom is.

“A Sower Went Out to Sow” is now more powerful to me than it ever has been before, because I realize the parable is not about me being a sower, or about us being sowers. The parable is about God planting the vulnerable but tenacious Gospel of Jesus all over the field of this world, knowing – as God does – that inviting “sinners (ALL of us) to come home” is inviting us toward the challenges of present and future every day, seeking our daily discerning and figuring out of what holds us back: Might custom hold us back? Might comfort hold us back? Might fear of opposition or failure hold us back? Shaking dust from our sandals and feet is not an act of self-righteousness or arrogance. When facing steep, long challenges, nourished by faith, hope, and love from God, shaking dust from our sandals and feet is an act of stewardship and commitment, done so that the Great Sower of faith, hope, and love will grow from us every day a proliferation of the Gospel through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Ponder the words of hymn number 171: “A sower walked throughout the land and everywhere he trod, he sowed his life because he was, himself, the Seed of God. But then, atop a barren hill, beneath a darkening sky, they threw God’s Seed on stony ground and left it there to die. The seed was buried deep in death beneath a blood-red sky, and deeper still was buried hope for those who watched him die. But then, in Joseph’s garden fair, as dawn broke o’er the land, the Seed, from three days’ silent sleep, awoke at God’s command! O Christ, you come among us still, the Sower and the Seed. As once you sowed the truth of God in glowing word and deed, implant your Word in waiting hearts, and let it there take hold, until it bears, in fruitful lives, a harvest hundred-fold” (Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr. – 1998).

Friends, with the seed of Jesus’ life planted in the soil of our lives, “heading home” is turning forward in God’s service in God’s world. The crop the field yields is every day the Sower’s work among us. – All honor and praise be to God.