
The Wasteful Sower

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Most of us have heard of parables since we were sent to Sunday school as children. Yet most of us were taught they were little morality tales to teach us how to be good little boys and girls and behave as our parents would like us to behave.

But the truth of the matter is that parables are not that concerned about lessons of good behavior, but about the deep, mysterious issues in life, things like who is God, what is God like, what is love and justice, how do we come up short? Parables by their very nature are not very clear, not very rational, they might be called narrative metaphors that point beyond the mundane, everyday stories of families and sheep and farming to the great mysteries of life, the opened-ended realities of being human.

Parables, therefore, are not readily explainable: For instance, is the father's behavior in the Prodigal Son Parable, a blue print for the way to raise children? I think not! Is the good shepherd very smart and savvy when he leaves the ninety nine sheep by themselves in the vulnerability of the desert? Hardly a smart move, nor a very good business plan!

Most of the parables that Jesus told have what Frederick Buechner calls a kind of sad fun about them. I think I would call that quality a sort of serious playfulness. For instance, in the Prodigal son the elder brother's pious pouting when the returning prodigal gets the welcome home party could be straight out of some French farce. Or in the outraged legalism of the laborers in the vineyard when the Johnny-come-lately's get as big a slice of the pie as the long time workers with tenure calls for the question: is this really fair? And Jesus' peculiar praise of the unjust steward seems to imply that it's better to be a resourceful rascal than a saintly do-gooder.

So to some degree, these parables""these little narrative metaphors""have some of the playfulness of a joke. If I've got to have it explained absolutely to me, my wife, Allison, says to me, don't bother! You just don't get it!

So what are some of the funny, peculiar, as well as puzzling sides of this morning's parable of the sower? First a contemporary enigma. Our lectionary omits the middle part of this whole section of Matthew's gospel""eight long verses to be exact""which tend to shed some light on the nature and purpose of parables and why Jesus used them. I have no idea why the wise persons who put the Prayer Book readings together omitted this section.

Then we have another strange thing with this parable of the sower. It is what most Biblical scholars say is an early "add-on" by some 1st century preacher feeling the necessity to explain the exact meaning of the parable. What this early preacher-disciple does is turn the parable into an allegory rather than a narrative metaphor which Jesus never does in any other place in the four gospels. This conscientious preacher like many of us preachers today must have thought he needed to make the parable absolutely clear and explain the metaphors away by saying this kind of soil stand for these kinds of persons and another kind of soil stands for those kinds of persons. By doing this and keeping it with the early collections of Jesus sayings, he seems to imply that Jesus didn't say what he really meant in the parable itself in the first place and that his hearers would not understand the metaphors anyway. I believe along with some very smart scholars that Jesus really ends

the parable much as he did many other parables with, "He who has ears, let him hear". So the first peculiar dimension of our text today simply understands the well-meaning, but sometimes confusing, foolishness of us preachers who try to explain what Jesus meant too clearly!

But the most startling thing to me that almost seem playful on Jesus' part, seems to get at the deep heart of this parable. And that is the utter wastefulness of the sower. The sower just keeps throwing out seeds relentlessly with out apparent regard for the kind of soil or where the seeds are landing. And when does he stop seeding in this parable? Never. It is as though the supply of seeds is limitless. It never stops.

Yes, seeds are scattered wastefully, and yet sloppily creatively but with enormous fecundity. There seems to be something fundamental here about creation itself. For example just think about the reproductive process. There are 150 million sperm cells produced by the male lover and only one finds one little egg from the female beloved for the bursting forth of a precious new life. And yet all the rest of the male's cell are wasted, but are they really? Could life exist otherwise?

With this image in mind then, I ask what might lie underneath this parable's metaphor, what are the deep things about the nature of God, about the Heart of the Universe itself? My hunch about this transcendent metaphor is simply this. God is like the sower. The grace of God comes almost recklessly and wastefully. The very heart of God is relentless in bestowing grace. It is as if the parable is making the radical point that the Creator can not be or do otherwise. At God's heart is the scattering of seeds of grace and love no matter what kind of soil you are or I am or the world is. Somehow mysteriously, those seeds can grow and flourish with in us also by the grace of the Sower.

Frankly my soul has been and continues to be like all these soils...rocky, hard, fickle, unstable, sparse, yet occasionally fertile. And yet the crazy belief that God's grace does not depend ultimately on my soil is fundamental to my understanding of who God is!

The great 20th century martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has helped me comprehend God as the sower of unrelenting grace. Bonhoeffer however makes the distinction between cheap and costly grace. Cheap grace is the grace where I assume I can grow and mature and create all by myself. It implies being blessed, but not responsible. It is acceptance without change, peace without justice, and love without sacrifice. In short, it is sweet Jesus without the cross. Cheap grace without progress and change is the most deadly enemy we Christians have. Cheap grace is vicious because it enables us to feel accepted and loved and blessed without allowing ourselves to ripen, to expand, to flower, to grow. We accept God's grace and Christ's church on our own terms because we assume we deserve or are entitled to it and more often than not, when we are called to accept grace on Christ's terms, it may not appear so free and amazing after all.

Now, it is my belief that relentless grace is announced and affirmed by Jesus consistently through parables and therefore not in spelled out doctrines, nor rational propositions. Maybe, just maybe, what Jesus is implying in parables is that sort of playful "absolutizing" and wild abandonment that a lover speaks of always in metaphors.

Once I heard Diana Ross sing at an event in the New York Cathedral, "Ain't no mountain high enough" "ain't no river wide enough" "ain't no valley low enough to keep me from getting to you, babe!" And of course that is the language of love, the language of metaphor, the language of parable. And what occurred to me, at that moment, was, surely, Jesus "enfleshed" that lover's passion with his entire life. So that Jesus' whole and complete life was in effect his greatest parable!

Sometimes in a moment of disgust with myself "my own infertile and barren soil" "my fickle faithfulness" "my own cynicism masquerading as post modern irony and wise sophistication" "my own lack of direction and composure.. At that moment, sometimes, a shower of seeds of grace bathes me and I chose, no, that's not true, I am chosen to see that by God's lavish and wasteful grace, I am MORE, that there is MORE. And at that moment, God becomes the lover and I am the beloved. And some small seed takes hold again and new life begins and we are fertile with fecund and prolific growth," some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty." And so my brothers and sisters, "those who have ears, let them hear."

Amen.

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