

WITHIN HEARING DISTANCE OF A PARABLE¹

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

June 26, 2011

Some parables of Jesus make a lot of racket. You hear them because you can't help but hear them! If you listen to some parables you hear the laughter and dancing of people at a wedding feast; in another you hear someone banging on a friend's door at midnight; in another you hear the shouts of a mugging taking place on the road to Jericho; in another you hear an older brother shouting in anger at his father upon the return of the prodigal son. Some parables, if you listen closely, make a lot of noise!

I

But this parable is quiet. If you stare closely at Millet's painting, "The Sower," you can enter the picture yourself and begin to hear it. And what you hear is the rhythmic breathing of the sower, the crunch of his footsteps walking along the hillside, the sound of his hand reaching into the bag of seeds and the little whirring sound of the seeds as they are thrown across the plowed furrows and quietly land in the soft earth. There is no talking, no singing, no laughing. There is just the rhythmic sounds of footsteps and the sowing of seeds in the soft wind. The sun is shining down quietly.

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The sower is doing his job, quietly and without fanfare. There is no crowd cheering him on, and there is no companionship. There is no television camera providing a close-up of his work. There is no one to check up on him to see if he is doing his job. There is only the imagination of the painter, Jean Francois Millet, drawn from this story that Jesus told long ago. *Listen*, said Jesus, *a sower went out to sow*. And with him go we all to do our own sowing, planting what seeds we can in our routine lives. We go, like Millet's sower, quietly throwing out the seeds on the hillsides of our life. Of course, our hillside looks very different than the painting, to say nothing of the image Jesus drew in his word painting we call a parable.

But different settings call for different images, do they not? There is, for example, a statue of the sower on the campus of Duke University. The Duke family had purchased the statue of the sower in Europe and kept it at their estate in New Jersey until it was moved to the university and given as a gift. It is the only statue on that campus that does not depict either a member of the Duke family or a famous graduate of Duke. It is a statue of a sower, representing all the seeds sown in those classrooms. And through the years, it has also become a symbol at that university of generous donors, who sow the seed with their wealth. When a person gives a certain amount of money to Duke University, they are given a miniature replica of the sower.

Think for a minute of the ways you sow seeds on the hillsides of your own life and work.... This is quiet thinking, for seed-sowing is a quiet business. It may be one of the most important businesses of all. How, for example, are we sowing seeds in this church? And what kind of seeds are we sowing? Think of all the quiet people you have known who sowed the seeds that germinated and grew within you and made you the kind of person you are today. We should quietly think of them and give thanks for them....

All of this is a reminder that we have to get close to this parable and listen to it in order to hear what Jesus is saying. Some parables, like some sermons, are quiet.

II

Not only is this parable quiet, it is also hopeful. Hope can be a rare commodity in these days of economic hardship, when jobs are scarce or in jeopardy, when every non-profit institution is struggling to cut expenses and increase revenue, when some here are experiencing serious health problems, when you can't travel on an airline without a thorough search. Hope seems to be in short supply.

But the image of this sower keeps coming back. The truth is, we don't know what is happening around this sower. Our imagination has to concede that life in general may not have been good for this sower; his family may be

in disarray; maybe his neighbors were feuding with him; maybe his government was crumbling; maybe armies were clashing just over the hill! But here he is out on the hillside doing what he knew to do: sowing seeds with hope.

Surely he knew that some of those seeds, as Jesus would later say, would be sown on rocky ground or among thorns or on poor soil. The image of this sower, in other words, recognizes from the beginning that there will be failure in our lives. Not all dreams will take root and grow. Not all decisions will be correct. Not all plans will blossom. Not all promises will be kept, and not all relationships will flourish. But the sower is the ultimate realist. He has enough experience to know that there will always be a harvest.

He is not a micro-manager. There is great faith in sowing seeds. The sower cannot control the seeds once they are sown. What grows may not be exactly what the sower would have chosen, and it may not grow at the rate or the time the sower would choose. But he sows the seeds because his realism leads him to know that there will be a harvest.

III

Every preacher of the gospel should read this parable and listen very closely to its quiet message. Preaching is much like sowing seeds. You cast

them out there, not knowing where they will land or what kind of soil will receive your words.

Behold, a preacher went out to preach.... But all of us can substitute whatever we do: Behold, a teacher went out to teach...a scientist went out to research...an administrator went out to administer...a carpenter went out to build...a doctor went out to heal.... We are all called to be sowers in our own way, and when we get quiet and listen very closely to this parable, what we hear most of all is a word of assurance to all of us who sow seeds in our lives. That message is one of hope. It is an assurance that although some seeds will fall on stony ground, and some will be choked out by weeds, there will still be a harvest! No matter how lonely you may feel out there on your hillside sowing your seeds, the harvest is sure. It is guaranteed!

The thing about harvest time is that it is easy to draw a crowd to a harvest. Drive into the countryside and you will see signs that say "You pick it!" People will gladly stop and even pay the farmer to participate in a harvest. But you never see signs out there that say, "You plant it!" Why? Because planting is a lonely and quiet business. Planting is what you do most of the time, and you nurture it as best you can and leave the rest to God.

IV

And one more thing: feeling lonely does not mean that you really are alone. When Jesus told this parable to his disciples, I imagine him talking with them down by the Sea of Galilee. Maybe he looks up on a hillside and sees a sower casting out those seeds, and that is what prompts this parable. He says, “Look up there! You see that fellow?” And they all look at him and study the way he is sowing the seeds. The sower, on the other hand, never knows that he is being watched, much less used as an illustration in a parable that will end up in a book which 2,000 years later would be considered sacred scripture!

Do you see what I’m getting at here? You and I may feel lonely sowing our seeds. But we never know who may be watching. And there is One whose “eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me,” as the old song says. There is One unseen to the sower who walks with him on that hillside, and for every seed sown there is the power of the universe waiting to make that seed germinate and grow.

So draw very close; be still and attentive; listen closely to this quiet parable, for what we will hear is a welcome word of encouragement!