

A PARABLE FOR JULY 4TH

Matthew 13:3-9

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 6, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

The Parable of the Sower is the first parable Jesus gives in the Gospel of Matthew. It is a work of art.

- 96 words
- Four sentences
- Six verses of scripture

Would that most sermons given on it were equally artful!

Whenever this parable appears in the lectionary, it is near the Fourth of July. To be sure, the framers of the lectionary did not choose this parable knowing that centuries later America would be celebrating her independence; but every time the parable lifts its head and says “preach me,” I cannot help but see ways that it speaks to our nation.¹

I.

At first glance, the parable seems to parallel the nearly-undaunted success of our still-brief national experiment.

A sower goes out to sow, venturing from himself into the world of nature and the world of civilization to grow his own food, to increase his own self-sufficiency, perhaps to feed his neighbors as well.

While some seed the sower sows falls on pathways, in rocky soil, or among thorns, enough seed falls in good soil that it brings forth grain, thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold. The yield seems to have no end; the numbers go on into infinity. The sower’s venture from self to society has left both immeasurably better.

This is a positive, hopeful picture of life, a picture consistent with how we view ourselves as Americans most of the time, even when times are not at their best.

**

We can see signs of the deep optimism that runs through our national character in the mottos states select for their billboards and license plates.

- Arizona: “God enriches”
- Arkansas: “Land of opportunity”
- California: “I have found it”
- Idaho: “Let it be perpetual”
- Kansas: “To the stars through adversity”
- North Dakota: “Strength from the soil”
- Oklahoma: “Labor conquers all”
- West Virginia: “Mountaineers are free”

Texas claims to be “The Lone Star State,” implying that one can both shine brightly and be independent at the same time. New York proudly proclaims itself “The Empire State,” while the much smaller New Mexico describes itself as “The Land of Enchantment.”²

¹ My interest in this parable has long been stoked by Amos Wilder, “Telling From Depth to Depth: The Parable of the Sower,” in his book *Jesus’ Parables and the War of Myths: Essays on Imagination in the Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 89-100.

² Since I was never very good about memorizing state capitals in grade school, and even less good about memorizing state mottoes, I got most of these from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_U.S._state_mottos.

These names reveal that as Americans, we have a high degree of hope, an exalted optimism, a sense of unlimited potential.

**

In addition to state mottos, we are aware that millions of people around the world yearn to come here, not just to visit, but to live. When they arrive, life gets so much better so quickly for so many that, despite barriers we often put up, they do almost anything to stay.

We are the only nation in history to be founded on the belief that not only does every human being have the right to “life” and to “liberty,” but also to “the pursuit of happiness.”³ The only constitution we have ever adopted promises not just “a perfect union,” but “a more perfect union.”⁴

So deeply a part of our national DNA is hope that when we follow this sower going out to sow we are not at all surprised when his effort produces a yield that grows from thirty-fold to sixty-fold to a hundredfold, and presumably beyond. The promise of his experience matches the promise of ours.

II.

Yet our national hope and optimism have been tested at particular moments in our history.

- Tested by the scourge of slavery ended only through Civil War
- Tested by the legacy of segregation lasting an additional century
- Tested by suffrage denied to half the population the first 150 years of our existence.

We've had

- Misadventures in foreign policy
- People sleeping on streets
- Between 10% and 20% of our population in poverty at various times and yet worries about childhood obesity as well.

These week in our own region we saw a black teenager brutally kill a white police officer then be killed himself by someone who had a key to his cell and who took justice out of the hands of the courts our nation has set up and place it in the keyholder's own hands.

Despite the optimism of our character, we sometimes wonder if our problems ever really change, or if they just undergo a makeover every decade or so.

III.

There is a note of caution in our parable as well as notes of hope and optimism; a note that we, in our exuberance, might overlook.

Notice that three-fourths of the seed the sower sows does not bear fruit.

- Some falls on a path and is immediately devoured by birds.
- Some falls on rocky ground where the soil is not very deep. It springs up, but then is scorched by the sun.
- Some falls among thorns which choke whatever small growth the seed attempts.

The sower has to sow four seeds for every one seed that bears fruit. A 25% return.

In addition, Jesus doesn't describe the yield in the order in which we expect it to occur.

- We expect to hear that the good seed increases from thirtyfold to sixtyfold to a hundredfold. That is in fact the way I have told the parable so far.

³ *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776.

⁴ *Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America*, 1789.

- But notice when Jesus tells the parable, the grain that bears fruit bears it *first* a hundredfold, *then* sixtyfold, *then* thirtyfold.

It is as if even in victory, the initial triumph is the highest triumph, and decline follows shortly. A hundredfold to sixtyfold to thirtyfold soon leads to zero-fold:

- No growth
- No yield
- Success short-lived
- A “one-hit wonder”
- “Fifteen minutes of fame” – followed by a lifetime of obscurity.

A final note of caution in this parable is the graphic way in which the fate of one set of seeds is described:

One set falls on rocky ground...
 Where they don't have much soil...
 And they spring up quickly...
 Since they don't have much depth of soil...
 But when the sun rises...
 They are scorched...
 And since they have no root...
 They wither away.

Of 96 words in the parable, nearly half (42) are devoted to the struggle and suffering of this one set of seeds.

Indeed, in this parable of brightness and hope, of yield and growth, there are significant overtones of darkness. “A sower went out to sow,” and all did not go as well as he had hoped.

IV.

So where does this parable leave us on this weekend in which we celebrate our 232nd year, still a babe among nations?

It leaves us with both light and darkness. The light is this:

- In the early 1960s, about 22% of Americans lived in poverty; today, it is a little over 12%. *That's light.*
- In 1964, there were 300 black elected officials in the United States; today, there are over 10,000. *That's light.*
- In 1965, there were six African-American members of the United States House of Representatives; today there are 42. *That's light.*⁵
- And as much as we worry – rightly – about the future of the air we breathe, the energy we consume, and the climate that surrounds us, a major reason for our worry is the simple fact that the standard of living in both China and India have skyrocketed, drastically reducing poverty in those “mega-nations.”⁶ *That's light.*

But there is darkness as well. To quote from a columnist who describes the darkness more eloquently than I:

China already has the power to wreck the American economy...Not even the gold medal in tyranny that Beijing will win in its Olympics will make a difference.

...the authoritarian Putin has...succeeded in restoring Russia to its inglorious heritage...

In Iran, none of Ahmadinejad's domestic troubles seem to have modified the state's sense of ascendancy, or its will to nuclearize itself, nor its appetite for instability in its region.

⁵ These facts are taken from “The Price Of Forgetting A Presidency,” by Joseph A Califano, Jr. in *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2008.

⁶ For a good presentation of the “mixed” state of light and darkness with global poverty, see “Rx for Global Poverty,” by Robert J. Samuelson, *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2008.

In Iraq, the streets are safer but the sects are not sweeter...

In Palestine there are two Palestines, and one of them belongs to Hamas.
In Darfur—well, you know, because everybody knows...⁷

The sower went out to sow, and three-fourths of what he sowed never, never, never bore good fruit.

V.

Unlike many of you, I am at the mercy of what I read, and some of what I have just read may be disputable. But two things are not disputable:

- It is a tremendous act of *courage* for a sower to get up in the morning and dare to plant seed, dare to hope that any of his effort – any of it – will bear fruit.
- But it is also an act of *necessity*. No sower has the luxury of not making the effort.

A woman who is the daughter of a Presbyterian minister spent nearly forty years teaching international relations at a small college in the Midwest. The day after 9/11, I met with her to get her perspective on that jarring event.

- She told me that she had begun teaching right after the Six Day War in 1967
- And that now she would be retiring a few months after 9/11.

Her teaching career bracketed by these two events, she said she hadn't gone into the field of international relations to study the conflict in the Middle East. But she had kept studying it, kept teaching it, kept travelling to it, kept learning its languages, because – in her words – “it was too important not to try.”

“A sower went out to sow.”

VI.

The promise
Of this deceptively simple parable
Is this:

In the way God works in the world,
The *courage* and the *necessity* of our trying
Will bear the fruit God needs it to bear.

“A sower went out to sow.”

“It is too important not to try.”

Amen.

⁷ These words come from “Forever Young,” by Leon Wieseltier, in *The New Republic*, February 27, 2008. Words of warning concerning more domestic issues were published in yesterday's column, “Cause for Alarm,” by Bob Herbert, in *The New York Times*, July 5, 2008.