

The Nerve for Failure¹

I nearly preached the wrong sermon this morning. What I thought I'd be saying this morning is "be that deep fertile soil that God can grow in. Don't be the hard, rocky, weedy, ground that will never produce."

Can you see the preacher's temptation in this story? Three quarters of it is about people who blow it in the Christian life. Wouldn't it be delicious to expand on them?

Dear friends; there are in our world some people, I'm sorry to say, who will never receive what God gives. Their lives are so hardened by sin and trampled by poor choices that the seed of God's word scarcely has a chance. They're like the dusty, trampled, packed ground our Lord refers to in this lesson.

That line of thinking is just too obvious, too self-indulgent, to be the proper approach. That would be straight from Hertz rent-a-sermon.

About mid-week last week I shifted my approach. We're on much more hopeful ground in seeing the Parable of the Sower as Jesus' vision for what the Kingdom of God is going to look like. God's triumph will look like a planting season with a lot of wasted seed scattered around, but success anyway because somebody is going to take it in and really let God grow and flourish in him or her.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on July 13, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Have you ever asked yourself the question, "what does success look like for Christian faith in the world?" Does it look like everybody in town coming to church? Does it look like a little band of people who've got the Truth being spared in the Judgment while everyone else is condemned? What is the prospect? And most importantly, what did success look like in Jesus' eyes?

What Jesus is telling the disciples is that God's reign will entail a stunning amount of failure and wasted effort but it will advance because every now and again someone really takes it in and permits God to grow.

Put differently, what Jesus is saying, or so it seems to me, is don't be confused by this world's measures of success and power. God will come to triumph in this world because a few will respond. The Kingdom of God is not a movement where everybody gets on board and overwhelms the landscape. Jesus didn't come to reunite all of Israel. Jesus didn't come to muster an army powerful enough to overthrow the Romans. His was a movement that triumphs in a few and somehow in them is the potential for the Kingdom to triumph everywhere.

It follows that you and I as disciples have the nerve to work with this. I say "nerve" because we live in a society that is preoccupied with achievement and success. How often are we mesmerized by the gospel of the big deal? The church or book or

preacher or program that is "packing 'em in." We are forever looking for the sower or the seed with 100% germination rate. Each sweep of the sower's hand brings an instant and uniformly lush field.

But Jesus' sower is remarkably ineffective by these standards. Where he goes effort and seed seem wasted. He doesn't leave lush fields, but darn little to point to except rotting seed and wilted sprouts to show for his effort. Oh yes, and a few strong plants also come through. It's this scene that, Jesus tells us, is how the Kingdom of God works.

What does this vision of the Kingdom of God as of you and me? I think that it, first of all, helps us relax in the face of disappointment in our congregational life. For the 19 years I was in Dayton, I had a secretary who set up and updated a little address rolodex file that I used to keep track of phone numbers and addresses. When new members joined she would type up little cards and put them in the rolodex. Very useful. Unfortunately, she never took cards out of the rolodex. Whenever someone died or drifted away or moved away or got mad and stomped out, his or her card remained in the rolodex. After ten or eleven years, every time I went through the rolodex I'd see the names of departed people. And it was a downer! There were more former members than current members.

No church has a perpetually growing congregation and a completely active rolodex. Jesus himself lost many more than he retained. The crowds dissipated and the Christian movement started with 120 followers—the group that gathered in the Upper Room at Pentecost. That group went on to grow into about half the population of the Roman Empire over the next three centuries.

Let's not assume that our mission and work together as disciples will appeal to everyone and that everyone who responds will stay forever—that's not the Kingdom. I commend to myself and to you the brashness of the young minister when confronted by an opinionated lady in his congregation who asked "How do you—young as you are—expect to please 700 people?" His answer. "I didn't come to please 700 people. I came to please one."

I think that the image of Jesus' sower, can also nerve us to sow seeds of love and witness in places that may not be receptive. There may be a lunch bunch of guys from the office who may seem just a little too fun-loving or rough around the edges to be interested in your convictions about God or your compassion for one or more of them. Take a chance! It's not a sin to fail. Reach out. You just might find a hidden patch of receptiveness you hadn't known was there.

[Harneys]

A fellow minister was telling me about a time when there was a man in his congregation who was going through one tragedy after another and was deeply burdened. His plight was so difficult that the minister crafted his sermon one Sunday to speak directly to the man. Of course, the preacher disguised his message to appear to be for the entire congregation. But it was really for one person.

After the service, the man shook the preacher's hand uneventfully and walked home. What caught the preacher's attention was the behavior of the church custodian who shuffled aimlessly with discarded bulletins and so on. When the congregation had cleared out, the janitor, with tears in his eyes grabbed the minister's hand and thanked him for exactly the sermon he needed in his life at that point.

You and I have no idea how or even if God will use our efforts to live as Jesus directs. The generosity and even wastefulness of the Sower may be wiser than he at first appears.

As I worked on this sermon a little Chinese (I think) proverb kept running through my head. "Don't count the seeds in the apple, count the apple trees in the seed." It's not Christian. But it's not bad.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth that "a wide door for effective work has been opened." Isn't that where this parable of the sower leads? It opens doors for you and me. Jesus never

expects that as we work for him that we would have a hundred percent success rate. He certainly didn't.

And that's liberating! It doesn't encourage fatalism or indifference. It encourages boldness and generosity. The sower is wonderfully self-forgetful. He's not measuring the seed with a spoon and sprinkling it fearfully. He's spreading it around with a free and generous hand. Reminds of the generosity of Jesus who gave his life for a cause entrusted to twelve men who had just abandoned him. Talk about a waste—by this world's standards. But it proved not to be a waste at all. It proved to be the pattern for our own reaching out, our own loving of friends, our own speaking truth to power. And we will fail. But the kingdom will triumph.