

Faithful Sowers of the Gospel

The gospel text that I am preaching on today is the text I preached on for my very first sermon in this pulpit, six years ago, when I came to be your minister at Trinity. That in itself is not so surprising. That's the way our lectionary cycle of readings works: there is a set list of readings for each Sunday over a three-year period. So the same readings come up in the same order after three years, six years, nine years, etc.

The customary challenge for preachers is not to preach the same sermon over and over again every three years, so that you end up saying, Oh yeah, it's *that* sermon again! I think there's not much risk of that this time. This week I reread my sermon from six years ago and discovered that, in many ways, it's not a sermon I would preach today. Some of you have said to me that you think I've changed over the time that I have been with you as your minister, and if that sermon is any indication then I suspect you may be right!

In that earlier sermon I talked about the parable of the sower as a metaphor, and I offered a set of three relatively innocuous interpretations of the parable. Take your pick, I seemed to suggest, dancing around the various possibilities non-committally. I went out of my way to soften the tone of judgement in the text, raising doubts about whether

the interpretation offered in the second part of the passage could reliably be traced back to Jesus.

I did raise a question that I still consistently raise, asking about the purpose of the church in a very changed, and still rapidly changing, world. The answer I offered then is almost the exact opposite of the answer I would give today. So, yes, I guess I have changed.

The sermon that I offered from this pulpit six years ago was in many respects a typical sermon that you might hear from any United Church pulpit over the last thirty, forty, fifty years or so. Reading Scripture metaphorically, toning down Jesus' words to make them more acceptable to our ears, offering a lot of options without inviting a specific commitment.

That sermon was a product of my United Church enculturation. I said all the things one was expected to say, words that would land gently on your ears, perhaps tug at your heartstrings, make you laugh a little; words that would give you a little, tiny, nudge towards taking some action. I was also new, and I wanted you to like me.

But over these last six years, and especially over these last three, I've been experiencing a transformation. Like the

words in our opening song this morning, “silent growth while we are sleeping,” something has been happening in my heart and mind, almost imperceptibly, that has shifted how I see the church, and how I see my role, and the work of preaching.

I believe that the transformation I’ve been experiencing is the work of God, the Holy Spirit, in my life. I believe that God is calling me to wake up, and to speak up, to say what is on my heart and mind, rather than continuing to work so hard to *not* say what I’m thinking. God’s calling me to risk going beyond the bounds of our United Church accepted wisdom, and even to risk not being liked by you.

As I said, six years ago I walked through the parable that Eric read for us today, offering a series of interpretations. I want to briefly recap what I said then and update it with what I think needs to be said today.

Back then I said the sower is an image of God, sowing indiscriminately, throwing the seed even onto places where it could not produce much result. And I suggested that we might hear this as an invitation to love as God loves: indiscriminately. That largely still makes sense to me.

Today I would add that the most powerful evidence of God’s profligate, extravagant, even wasteful love is Jesus, the Son God sent into the world to reconcile the world to God. God loved us so much he would do anything to reach us. On the cross, God in Jesus suffered torture and died a humiliating death on behalf of us and all humanity, the deserving and the undeserving.

God is indeed profligate, wasteful, unbelievably generous in his love.

Six years ago I asked us to imagine ourselves as the seeds in the story. I suggested that the fate of the various seeds, as determined by where they landed, was a metaphor for mystery in human life, for the inexplicable reality that often bad things happen to good people, or, in the words of the song we sang, that there are “truths that still confound us.”

The idea of mystery is still important to me, but today I would emphasize even more the strangeness, the otherness, of God. So often we want to bring God down to our level, to make God serve our agendas, rather than us participating in God’s agenda. We think we know better where and how the seed ought to be sown; when really sometimes our work is to let go, and let God do as God wills, whether it makes sense to us or not, whether we approve or not.

Also, the text itself tells us that the seeds are a metaphor for “the word of the kingdom,” the Good News, the gospel message. That’s what’s at the heart of this passage: that the gospel, the Good News of the kingdom is cast profligately into our lives, and into the world, with wildly different results.

This is where the explanation in the second half of the reading comes in. Jesus explains a series of responses to hearing the gospel message: a lack of understanding, so that the message doesn’t get through; a quick acceptance, followed by a quick abandonment when the going gets tough; a turning away because of the distractions of the cares of

the world and wealth; and finally, an understanding complemented by perseverance and commitment, that bears an abundant harvest.

And this is the biggest change between what I preached six years ago and now. Then I said that the world wasn't really hearing our message about the kingdom of God, and so we ought to adjust. That rather than bringing people into the fellowship of the church, or bringing them to faith in Jesus, that we ought to let all that go, and be content to just "tend the soil," and contribute to the nurturing of good in the world.

Today, I say almost the opposite of that. I believe that the purpose of the church is to profligately share the Good News, to spread abroad the word about the kingdom. It's true that often the world often isn't listening to our message.

But that's just what the parable says. It says that most of the time our message will go unheard, or be misunderstood or neglected. It says that sometimes people will jump into our community, but then just as rapidly run away the first time they discover something about church that they don't like. The parable says that sometimes even folks who have been around a while will turn away, and get distracted by work and family concerns, or by wealth or self-interest.

The parable says that only a few will hear the message and be moved, and persist in times of trouble, when the going gets tough, or when the going gets boring, or when participation becomes costly, in terms of money, or time, or the ongoing commitment of our hearts and our

attention. Only a few will stick it out; but those few who do will bear abundant fruit.

It's a great parable for this time in the church. The church isn't popular? The church is losing members? Well, it's to be expected; Jesus himself said it would be this way, that the gospel message would never win a popularity contest, that it might even turn away more folks than it would attract.

The alternative, it seems to me, is the strategy that we have pursued for too long in the United Church, and in the liberal Protestant church generally. The alternative is the pursuit of relevance, popularity, growth. Like me on my first Sunday, we want to be liked; we don't want to say anything that might cause any offense.

If the Gospel—the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and what that story says about God's love for the world—if that story is difficult to understand, or if it's hard to sell because it's too demanding or it's too boring, we've been all too willing to abandon that story in favour of one the world finds more attractive or enticing.

And let's face it—it is a hard sell. Taking Jesus and the gospel seriously involves putting up with things that we don't understand. It is demanding, a total commitment of all our heart, soul, and mind. It is also boring at times, the day to day love and commitment that any long term relationship requires. It is also, our faith tells us, the only kind of life worth living, a way of life that bears much fruit, for us and for the world God loves.

There are alternative stories, ones that are much more in tune with our current culture. There are things we can do to make ourselves more popular, to be sure, including watering down, or dumbing down, or changing our message, the word about the kingdom. But to what end? We might see a temporary boost in numbers as people flock to a popular program, only to have them fall away again.

Our calling is not to be popular. It is to be faithful stewards of the Gospel. The Gospel is the precious seed that we are now given to cast about freely in the world. That is our core purpose. In the mystery of all things, it's not for us to worry about whether or not that is going to make us popular, or save the church from extinction. The Church belongs to God. We need to trust that it is in good hands.

Let us pray:¹ Lord Jesus, as we serve you, please preserve us from becoming discouraged by the paltry results of our discipleship. We do our best to please you through our efforts on behalf of your kingdom.

We give and work and pray, but sometimes we don't see much fruit from our attempts to be your agents in our community.

We want to be firm in our faith, to wholeheartedly give ourselves to you, but then we waver. We lose heart and become discouraged.

During this time of worship, give us the encouragement we need to be faithful

to your mission. Give us eyes to see your kingdom breaking forth among us. Above all, remind us that you are at work in the world, whether we are or not, and that your kingdom will come, your will will be done on earth as it is in heaven, no matter what. Amen.

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¹ Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource.