

## **The Slippery Slope of Scattering Seeds**

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 13, 2008

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying,

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let everyone with ears listen!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what is sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endured only for a while, and when trouble of persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Parables are funny things. They seem so delightful sitting on the page. Sweet little stories that Jesus tells to explain what he really means by asking his disciples to “follow me.”

But when you unpack the parables Jesus teaches – something strange happens. Not only do the parables not make perfect sense; after sitting with them for a while – the world itself starts to not make sense.

And I guess that is just the point. Jesus teaches in parable – not to make moralistic points, but to begin to paint a picture of *another world* that is breaking into the here and now. That is, the parables of Jesus are really the faint brush strokes that outline the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>1</sup>

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Today’s parable is familiar. Often, we hear this parable and we think about the soil. I confess that in my Haynesville Shale hysteria – the soil captured my attention first. What kind of soil are we? Are we fertile soil – receptive to the seed of the Word of God? Are we thorny soil – where the cares of the world choke off the good news of the gospel? Are we the rocky soil – stunted by our unwillingness to allow the Word of God to penetrate us in a significant way?

They are all good questions; but today I invite you to see this parable from the eyes of the sower - the one who scatters the seed.

I am not much of an agriculturalist, but even I noticed that this sower – or planter (as I have been taught to say) – does not seem overly concerned about where she is scattering the seed. The seed goes everywhere! On the path, in the rocks, among the thorns. It is not as if the path, or the rocks, or the thorns just all of a sudden appeared! What a waste! How reckless! Where is the research; the intentionality; the care for the precious seed that is being thrown around?

The sower is seemingly less concerned about where the seed lands than he is with whether the seed is scattered.

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<sup>1</sup> Dodd, C.H., *Parables*, p. 5.

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Last week a group from this church went to a conference in Montreat, North Carolina called “Church Unbound.” One of our keynote speakers for the conference was a man named Shane Claiborne. At first glance, Shane is not the kind of person you would imagine would be headlining a conference for Presbyterians. Evangelical, dreadlocked, an activist, and far from buttoned-up – Shane has become somewhat of the mouthpiece for a new kind of Christianity that is committed to seeking social justice and living with the poor (he was even featured on CNN a couple of weeks ago as the kind of “new evangelical” both Democrats and Republicans are seeking after). Shane is the founder of a group called “The Simple Way” that is based out of Philadelphia. Their mission statement is “To love God. To love people. To follow Jesus.” which sounds a lot more simple than it is.

The stories that Shane told us were incredible. Stories from his time in Calcutta, India with Mother Theresa doing ministry with the lepers and the outcast; stories from Iraq, where he lived with Iraqi Christians during the bombing raids at the start of the war; stories of living with the homeless in Philadelphia. It would be easy for me to dismiss Shane as just another “Jesus Freak” if he weren’t so compelling in his witness of living out his faith in ways that challenge the casual nature I live out my own.

Shane is captivated by the call to discipleship. He takes Jesus at his word: loving his neighbors and his enemies, feeding the poor, reaching out to the outcast. And while he has many incredible stories about the grace of God taking root and rendering happy endings to those with whom he has come in contact – he has many more stories that do not turn out like any of us would hope.

It is in this way that Shane offered our group the most compelling witness: that as the church, as the gathered people of God, we are called – above anything else – to risk giving ourselves away.

One of the reasons that Shane is dissatisfied with the church (and he is – though he is still committed enough to speak at church conferences like the one we attended) is because he is frustrated by the church’s unwillingness to risk itself in the service of the gospel.

As an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament who practices a pretty safe and conventional type of faith, I am convicted by his frustration.

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As the sowers of God's seed – and in Matthew's gospel, it is clear that, as the church of Jesus of Christ, this is what we are<sup>2</sup> – as the sowers of God's seed we are called to dispense the good news without account of where that news may fall. Ours is not a careful investment strategy. As we extend the grace of God in Jesus Christ to a world that is desperate to receive it, we are not called to reserve that grace for those meet our criteria. We are called to lavish the grace that we freely receive *freely* – whomever, whenever, wherever. When it comes time for harvest, some of that seed will have borne fruit, and some of it will have not.

This is what is risky. There is a tension between the generosity of God's grace and the reality of the world. Many times the world in which we live is not ready to receive what we have to offer. Anyone who has spent time doing any kind of ministry knows this. Sometimes the seed doesn't take hold.

Good programs fail; carefully crafted lesson plans fall short; the work of reconciliation breaks down; money given to mission programs is squandered. Sometimes the seed doesn't take hold.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, those who have invested themselves in the practice of ministry also know that some of the seeds they plant produce in places and ways and with people they could not imagine. And that is what is really risky – because *sometimes the seed does take hold*; and it takes us where we would not normally go.

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One of these incredible stories that Shane told us was about his journey from a “cool” Methodist kid to what he describes as “an ordinary radical.” Shane grew up in east Tennessee, going to church

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<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 28:18-20

<sup>3</sup> Long, Tom, *Matthew* (Westminster/John Knox, 1997) p. 147.

and to youth group. He went to church camps – and describes a conversion experience where he went forward and he was “born again.” Then, in his words, “The next year, we went to the same [camp] and most went forward again (it was so good the first time) and got born again, again. In fact, we looked forward to it every year. I must have gotten born again six or eight times, and it was great every time.”<sup>4</sup>

After a while, though, Shane began to be disaffected with the church of his youth. As he describes, “I came to realize that preachers were telling me to lay down my life at the foot of the cross and weren’t giving me anything to pick up. A lot of us were hearing ‘don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t sleep around’ and naturally started asking, ‘okay, well, that was pretty much my life, so what do I do now?’ Where are the do’s? And nobody seemed to have much to offer us.”<sup>5</sup>

What Shane ended up picking up was a call to live with the kind of people that Jesus lived with. In college in Philadelphia, after hearing that a group of homeless people who had been living in an abandoned Catholic cathedral were going to be evicted by the archdiocese, Shane and his friends decided to go see if they could help. As they arrived at the Cathedral in downtown Philly, a sign greeted them on the front door or the church: “How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?” For the next few months, a steady stream of students from Shane’s college would live with this group of homeless squatters to prevent them from being evicted (they knew the police and the archdiocese did not want to create a scene). During this time, Shane discovered his call to found “The Simple Way.” As he describes it, “It was in St. Edward’s that I was born again, again. There is something mystical about finding God in the ruins of the church.”

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Soren Kirkegaard pointedly said,

The matter is quite simple. The Bible is easy to understand.  
But we Christians...pretend to be unable to understand it  
because we know well that the minute we understand, we are

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<sup>4</sup> Claiborne, Shane, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Zondervan, 2006) p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the real world?<sup>6</sup>

What would our life as a congregation look like if we took seriously our call to scatter broadly the gospel seed in our world? I don't know. But it would take us to new places – and into contact with different kinds of people. And I bet it would be a compelling witness to people who are hungry for a different kind of Christianity.

If you have read your copy of the *Link*, you have heard about the most recent meeting of the General Assembly of our denomination. Just in case you don't know, the General Assembly is the highest governing body in our denomination that meets every two years. It is made up of equal numbers of ruling elders (the session) and teaching elders (pastors) who are sent from each local Presbytery.

This year, yet again, the General Assembly made national headlines because we continue to fight over what we fought about for the past 30 years: whether people who are practicing homosexuals can be ordained to office in the church.

Obviously, this debate is one that raises a lot of passion. It is also a debate that is important – to those who are most affected by it, and to those who hold firm and faithful convictions about their view.

But, as one who is has been alive for only a year longer than the debate has been raging in our denomination, I need to tell you: if the church is defined by our fighting about the issue of ordination then we have missed the central mark of what it means to be the called out people of God. More than that, if we allow this fight to eclipse our mission as the Body of Christ that is sent out into the world, then we will forsake what is compelling about witness.

Shane talked about his disaffection with a church that asked him to lay down his life at the foot of the cross but didn't give him anything to pick up. I believe the Presbyterian Church has much to offer those

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<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, Soren, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kirkegaard* (Farmington, PA: Plough, 2002) p. 201.

who are committed to living out their call as disciples – but if this fight continues to define us, what will be most visible at the foot of the cross will be our consternation...and who wants to pick up that?

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The church has been entrusted to scatter the seeds of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Whomever, wherever, whenever. It is a big responsibility. It is an exciting responsibility.

We are on a journey – and we do not know where it will lead – only where it will end.

I pray that as we journey together – ours might be a voyage that is marked by holy risk and reckless generosity. And I believe that if we are faithful to our calling, then others will be compelled to join us as the faint outline of the Kingdom of Heaven comes ever closer into view.

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All thanks and praise be to God – who alone is Lord of the Harvest.  
Amen.