

Listen! A Sower went out to Sow
Ben Woodward Breckbill
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Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ² He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." ⁹ And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

¹⁰ When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹ And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret^[a] of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹² in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

¹³ And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.^[b] ¹⁸ And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²⁰ And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

²¹ He said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? ²² For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. ²³ Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"²⁴ And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. ²⁵ For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

26 He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples

"Listen! A sower went out to sow." Today we encounter Jesus as a preacher and teacher. In a list of roles and attributes you assign to Jesus, Does "Teacher" appear? Where on the list? For me, it's pretty high.

Because as I was Growing up in the Mennonite church, I found my church pointing my faith toward Jesus' earthly life. Some denominations may focus more on the cross, for example, some on Jesus' birth, but I was taught to pay special attention to Jesus' ministry and ethics. I learned that I was a disciple of Jesus, one of the ordinary people he called to follow him. I am supposed to be like Jesus, and so I can place myself in the Gospel story as one of those who followed him. What Jesus said to them, he says to us.

In this particular chapter, Jesus' call to following him is "Listen!" Pay attention! You are my students, and it is time to focus up. What I have to say is important, and I'm choosing to tell you."

The call to listen made to Jesus' followers is a call to us. It is the first word of the first parable that Jesus speaks, and it is peppered

throughout the chapter. We are asked to listen – listen with intention, listen as though our lives depend on it. Jesus is our teacher. Are we prepared to listen? Are we prepared to respond?

II

What does Jesus teach? The summary of Jesus' preaching in Mark 1 is that he said, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." This can be taken as the distillation of all of Jesus' teaching. But most of the teaching he ends up doing is storytelling, or, as this chapter puts it, "He began to teach them many things in parables." Story was Jesus' chosen way to teach about the reign of God that he came to announce. In Mark 4, Jesus tells three main parables, all stories about growing seeds.

Jesus Tells the first parable, *"listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."* ⁹ And he said, *"Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"*

The parable of the sower is one of the most familiar parables, some say *the* essential parable, and one of the only ones that Jesus offers an interpretation of. Even so, I think we don't often get as much from it as we could. These stories are multifaceted and mysterious; so is the reign of God. But here's what Jesus says about it:

"The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

The seed is the word. The soils are different people, who receive the word more or less well. With this help, the parable seems to become simple, easy to apply to our own lives. We might summarize its point as: Those who listen to Jesus well and without distraction will bear great fruit. Okay, but in my experience it is very easy to read this parable, with that point, and become self-righteous or judgmental. The focus is on how good my soil is, and this interpretation goes disastrously astray when we start to identify other people with the other types of soil: for

example, “those people over there are a lost cause; they stand no chance of being good Christians. There is no reason to spread the word to them.” Have you ever said that? Or how about this one? “Those people over there look like ‘good’ Christians they show quickly and excitedly that they have received the word, but I know they don’t really mean it. Their excitement will never last, their appearances deceive.” Have you ever had that uncharitable thought about someone who “looks Christian?” They look good, but I know they are insincere or hypocritical. This parable should not be an excuse to belittle others. The moment we begin to use this parable to call people lost causes, well, I think we’ve lost our cause.

Jesus encourages us to listen, and listen well, throughout this chapter; this parable also encourages us to listen well. I don’t want to discount the importance of trying to listen well, to bear good fruit, to produce a great yield in ourselves as we follow Christ. **Yet I think this parable can also point us in a different direction: we are called to be the sower.** I suggest three pieces of evidence for this idea: one in this parable’s context in Mark, one in the other parables in the chapter, and one in this parable’s surprising depiction of sowing seed.

III

First, in the Gospel, the followers of Jesus are called to undertake several specific actions. They are meant to follow Jesus: Jesus calls followers, and just before these parables Jesus names the twelve he calls apostles,

to be his closest followers. After this commissioning, the apostles *hear* Jesus teach these parables, and they *see* the amazing things that Jesus does: calming a storm, driving out a demon, healing a woman, restoring a girl to life, and finally being rejected in his hometown. What a shocking series of events! Immediately after that, in chapter 6, Jesus *sends* the apostles off to do the same things that they heard him say and saw him do: they are to go out and announce the reign of God in word and deed. The “Listen” in today’s chapter cannot be separated from the “go” of chapter six. They are a package deal – when following Jesus, we can’t pick and choose. The apostles *go out to spread* the word. The apostles learned about their task by *listening* to the parables Jesus tells about the sower sowing the word. The parable loses much of its meaning when separated from this context, and without the going out, the listening loses some of its value. The apostles are the sower in this story, and Jesus is preparing them for a mixed response to their message. As they go out, they will encounter all sorts of responses to their message, as Jesus well knows: this is not said to denounce those for whom the apostles’ work is not effective, but to acknowledge that not all people will respond positively – but when they find good soil, the result will be great. As we are Jesus’ disciples today, listening to the teacher is preparation for going out to our task.

Closer reading of the chapter’s other parables, too, suggests that Jesus is preparing his disciples to be sowers: Jesus tells two more parables about seeds (identified as the word of God) in this chapter. Growing seeds are the connection between these parables. The reign of God isn’t

just what the sower does, the reign of God is in the growth that follows. The processes of sowing and growing have something important to teach the apostles about Jesus' mission, which they are about to undertake. They are going to preach the reign of God, and Jesus tells them,

"The reign of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Once again, a sower goes out to sow, and again, that's all the sower does. The sower doesn't clear, or cultivate, or fertilize. Clearly cultivating grain takes more than this, but the point is well taken: the growth is truly a matter between the seed and the soil. In this case, we can see the ground is good, because the seed does put down roots, and grow, and produce ripe grain. But that *process* is the reign of God: a complex, secret process, unknown to the sower. The seed, the word of God, has a power of its own, when brought into contact with the soil. The person who sowed continues to labor, sleeping and rising, but the growth happens without her. The process ends when the seed bears fruit, and harvest comes. Do we trust that if we were to sow the word of God, it would find growth?

The third parable says, “*With what can we compare the reign of God, or what parable will we use for it?*”³¹ *It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;*³² *yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”*

Here again, the miraculous interaction between sowing, seed, and earth is brought to our attention. Listen to that wording again, the unnecessary repetition of it: *It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the earth, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth;*³² *yet when it is sown it grows up.* Twice Jesus emphasizes that the seed is sown, given, cast to the earth, by a choice. Jesus does not say that it falls to earth, or found its way there, but that the mustard seed was sown. Twice he emphasizes that the seed is on the earth – brought into contact with its area for growth. A seed kept in its satchel cannot grow, and the word of God trapped in a Bible, or a church, or even in our hearts, cannot go out to grow. If we have seed, it must be sown. And in this case, the mustard seed produces a great mustard plant, and birds come and live in its branches. There is no mention here of bearing fruit, or being ready for harvest. Yet we know that the sown seed is good, and we know that this process, too, is the reign of God – that’s the reason Jesus used it as an example. The sower, again, is ultimately not in control of the seed’s fate: it may not be what the sower was intending, or it may not be strictly useful to the sower. Even so, this is the reign of God: made possible

when the seed is sown. Are we worried that we won't be able to benefit if we spread the word of God?

Again, I think that the disciples of Jesus are called to be sowers. The job of Jesus' disciples is to sow, to spread the word of the reign of God. They, that is, we, are sent out to do this job, knowing that the growth of that reign is not our own doing, but relies on processes we don't control, and sometimes has effects not for our benefit. And the parable that begins this lesson about sowing does *not* begin by saying, "the reign of God is like" – in fact, the reign of God is not specifically mentioned in the parable of the sower. Rather, it begins, "Listen! A sower went out to sow." Drawing from the other two parables, we may say that the Kingdom of God is not the sowing, but the growth that occurs once the sowing has happened. Yet Jesus begins the lesson on the reign of God with an extended unit on the process of sowing: preparing his disciples for their role.

And it is not good farming practice that Jesus advocates, either. Maybe it is because Jesus was a carpenter, preaching from a boat to a crowd of fishermen on the seashore – but really, who sows on the path, or on the rocks, or straight into a bed of weeds? Believe me, people of the day knew how to clear earth – it's an agricultural skill that had been in development for several millennia at that point. It would have been perfectly possible just to sow on the good earth, to have a discriminating eye. Jesus does acknowledge, in his explanation of the parable, that not all people will receive the word well, that not all soils will be adequately

prepared, at the time of the sowing, to receive the seed. So, too, the apostles may experience rejection of their message. But that is less important than the act of sowing, and Jesus says that the sower casts seeds indiscriminately, knowing that growth comes from God, not the sower's own discrimination. It is by the grace of God that the word is provided, and by the grace of God that the word grows into the reign of God. It is not the sower's responsibility to decide where the seed will have no chance, and thus not cast any seed. The sower is called to reflect that extravagant, profligate, irresponsible grace of God to cast seeds far and wide, wherever they may fall. Furthermore, Jesus easily could have said, "a person went out to sow," but he did not. He said, "A sower went out to sow." When the disciples of Jesus are identified as sowers, they have no choice in what they are to do: they are defined by their sowing. When the disciples of Jesus stop sowing the word, the good news of God's reign, they stop being disciples. Do we take seriously this identity placed on the disciples of Jesus, as those sowing the word of God for all people to hear?

I began this sermon by remembering that we are often most at home when we are thinking about the earthly life of Christ: we are disciples on a journey, following Jesus. The human Jesus is often more comfortable than the divine Jesus. Discipleship has been a strong Anabaptist emphasis for centuries; it has led to much that is good about our church. I suggest that today we are less comfortable with Christ as divine, and theologically we're more at home placing the emphasis of our faith on being disciples. But are we prepared for the demands of that call, as

revealed in these parables? Jesus asks us to follow. What Jesus told to those who followed him in his earthly life, he tells to us as well. When we say yes to following, leaving behind all else, the demands become greater: we are told to watch, to listen, and to *go* in order to show and tell. Jesus means us when he articulates his disciples' role: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. Not every seed that she sowed bore fruit, at least not with this sowing. But what did grow, grew by the grace of God – and it was a picture of God's reign." These parables are not designed simply for introspection or evaluation, for determining who around us has good soil and who has bad. These parables are a call to action. The action called for is not to cast judgment, but to cast the word of God.

In this case, those following Jesus are being prepared for their great task: to go out spreading the word of God. If we are to be disciples of Jesus, if we are to follow Christ in life, this sowing must be a part of our task. Go out and spread the word: the word of the God who came to earth, the Christ who died and was raised, the word of the Spirit-filled reign of God that Jesus came to announce. Beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "your God reigns!"

Listen! A sower goes out to sow.