

I

He's the goofiest looking farmer I've ever seen, and when you stand in the pulpit of the Conyers Presbyterian Church in Rockdale County, you can't help but notice him. For nearly a century, he's been frozen in time, captured in a circular stained-glass window that sits high above the balcony in the rear of the sanctuary. In Conyers, they call the window "The Sower."

But to my eye, he doesn't look much like a Georgia farmer. In fact, to my eye, he looks more like a character out of Robin Hood or some other old English tale. He's wearing a green tunic over what looks to be a pair of bright yellow tights, and with some ridiculous pointy-toed boots on his feet. A floppy hat two sizes too large practically falls off his head.

He's not standing still, carefully measuring his field, dutifully planning his crops, or even carefully stepping through the freshly plowed rows. No, he's in an exaggerated stride, almost as if dancing, so much so that the bag of seeds on his hip seems to be bouncing to and fro to his motion. And one arm is outstretched high above his head, almost like a ballet dancer, releasing seeds that are scattering every which way. Not to put too fine a point on it, but he just looks ridiculous.

And every Sunday, whoever is standing in the pulpit is confronted with the image of this goofy, gleeful sower skipping his way over the heads of the people of God.

II

As most of you know, this winter and spring, we've been making our way through the gospel according to Mark. Thus far in the story, Jesus' ministry has been centered in the villages that line the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, but the word about Jesus has begun to spread, and people are coming from points near and far to see and hear this one who teaches with authority, this one who has the power to heal the sick, and some say, even the power to forgive sins. And so I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Mark 4:1-20.

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.

He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "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. 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. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; 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.'"

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? 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."

Can you imagine what must have been going through the peoples' minds

when Jesus began to tell this parable about this farmer? The region in and around the Sea of Galilee was then and is now arid and rocky. Seed, as it was then and is now, is precious and often expensive. Even the most inexperienced farmer would naturally be inclined to carefully prepare and till the soil, and then do their level best to ensure that as little seed as possible was wasted.

But Jesus describes this sower who skips along scattering seeds willy-nilly. This sower who seems to have no regard for where any of it lands – with some just left on the path, some carelessly flung into the thorn bushes, seeds scattering through the air so far and wide that it's practically raining.

And yes, it's a nice little ending that some does indeed make it to the good soil, and yes, a yield of 30 or 60 or 100-fold is incredible, but still – what a fool this sower to be scattering precious seeds hither and yon. I imagine that much of the crowd was left scratching their heads about this goofy sower, and perhaps a few of them even went away clucking their tongues about this poor display of stewardship.

But later that evening, it was just Jesus and the twelve and a few others, and the topic came up again. They said, in Ryan's Revised Translation of Mark's Greek, "Hey Jesus, uh, what was that story about the sower all about? Can you run that by us again?"

And Jesus, with a twinkle in his eye, lowers his voice and motions them all to come closer. "The parable of the

sower contains the secret of the kingdom of God,” he whispers.

And I imagine that the disciples just looked at Jesus much like most of you are looking at me right now. Well, are you going to tell us? What’s the secret?

Well, here’s what I think the secret is. The secret is that in the kingdom of God, the seed bag is bottomless. In the kingdom of God, there is no limit to the number of seeds that can be sown. In the kingdom of God, the sower need not worry and fret and fuss over where the seeds fall – he or she can skip or dance or twirl their way through the fields with joy and thanksgiving, because of the overflowing generosity and abundance of the One who gave the seeds in the first place.

To me, that’s the secret of the kingdom of God – the overflowing grace – the extravagant generosity – the everlasting abundance of the One who made the seeds and gives them to us to sow willy-nilly hither and yon.

III

Jesus begins the parable by saying, “A sower went out to sow.” And that’s an odd phrase, because what else would a sower do but sow? But I’ve been thinking about you, about all the different things you are, all the different hats you wear in a given week, or even in a given day.

And it strikes me that Jesus could have also said, “A disciple went out to disciple.” He could have also said, “A

leader went out to lead.” He could have also said, “A lover went out to love, a teacher went out to teach, a healer went out to heal, a counselor went out to counsel, a learner went out to learn, a parent went out to parent,” and the list goes on.

In all of those different roles you play in your life, because the life, death, and resurrection of this strange rabbi from Galilee we call Jesus the Christ, in all of the different roles you play in your life, God has called you to be a sower of seeds.

God has called you to be a sower of seeds of love. A sower of seeds of grace. A sower of seeds of forgiveness. A sower of seeds of gentleness. A sower of seeds of kindness. A sower of seeds of justice. In all the different hats you wear, God has called you to be a sower.

And that can be hard work. It can be disappointing to see the seeds of grace and mercy and love and justice that you’ve sown be gobbled up by the birds, or scorched by the sun, or thrown back in your face.

But here’s the good news of the gospel. In the kingdom of God, there is no limit to the number of seeds. There’s no need to fret or stress over seeds that you sow that might fall on the path, or the rocky soil, or in the brambles and thorns. Just reach into that bag and scatter some more, giving thanks and praise to the One who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike.

As you scatter those seeds, just know that some will see what you're doing and call you goofy, or worse. Some might even cluck their tongues and shake their heads at you. Don't worry about that – it's an occupational hazard of being a disciple of Jesus.

You just keep sowing those seeds, because you're in on the secret of the kingdom of God. There's no bottom to the bag. You'll never run out of God's seeds of grace. You'll never run out of God's seeds of mercy. You'll never run out of God's seeds of justice. You can dance and skip and twirl your way through the fields before you, because you are in on the secret of the kingdom of God.

IV

Tomorrow, the country will mark a day in remembrance of a Georgia preacher that was born not very far from this spot. I think he understood himself to be a sower of seeds – seeds of justice, seeds of equality, seeds of righteousness, not just here in the South, but across our nation.

No doubt some of those seeds fell on the path. Some fell on the rocks. Some fell among the thorns. No doubt some, including his fellow clergy, clucked their tongues at him and called him a fool, bringer of trouble, a Communist. When this sower of seeds spoke out against an unjust war, the then sitting President of the United States called him a name that I will not repeat from this pulpit.

And yet he continued to scatter those seeds, here, there, and everywhere, right up until the day a bullet took his life before he was yet 40 years of age.

But it was too late, because some of those seeds of justice and mercy and love and grace fell in the good soil. And those single little seeds of God's justice, God's grace, God's mercy, God's love – they continue to create a yield to this very day, each seed giving a yield of 30, 60, even 100-fold.

He knew the secret of the kingdom of God, and so do we – the bag of seeds has no bottom, because it belongs to the One who makes the seeds, and the soil, and the sun, and the rain.

There's an old country song that says this:

*One hand reaches out and pulls a
lost soul from harm, while a
thousand more go unspoken for,
and they say what good have
you done, by saving just this one.
It's like whispering a prayer in
the fury of a storm.*

*And I hear them sayin' you'll
never change things, and no
matter what you do it's just the
same thing.*

*But it's not the world that I am
changing. I do this so this world*

*will know that it will not change
me.¹*

It's not the world that we are
changing.

What we do is sow,
so the world will know,
that it will not change *us*.

Let anyone with ears to hear
listen!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ "The Change," lyrics by Anthony M.
Arata and R. Wayne Tester