

Lessons from a Sabbatical: The Dumb Farmer

Mark 4:1-9

August 18, 2016

It is good to be back with you. As Larry mentioned, I have been on a 3-month sabbatical. I described my sabbatical in our most recent church newsletter, so please read that if you have not done so.

I did two new things during my sabbatical. One is I started journaling. Normally I hate journaling, and I haven't done it on a regular basis since high school. But I found when I typed it, I began to enjoy it, and journaled most everyday. In one of my last entries before I went to back to work, I tried to described my sabbatical experience in this way:

Sabbatical Day 90: So, as I think back over this sabbatical, it has been amazing. Sweet. Fulfilling. Challenging. Deep. Emotional. Selfish. Surprising. Satisfying. I feel blessed....and ready to go back. I hope that I have changed and will be a better pastor who listens more, prays more, shares Christ more... Slow to anger. More courageous. And hopefully, somehow gained more wisdom. May it be so.

Another new thing I did on my sabbatical is something I never thought I would ever do because of my personality and age. For the moment, I am not going to tell you what it is but it does go with my message today.

So with that, turn with me to our scripture passage this morning: Mark 4:1-9. We know it as the Sower and the Seed, but the correct title is "The Parable of the Sower."

Prayer: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Mark 4:1-9

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ² He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³ "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

⁹ Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

Have any of you ever been asked the question: What kind of soil are you?

Most of the time when we hear this parable, we focus on the soils. There are 4 kinds of soils that Jesus describes, and 3 out of the 4 soils have a hard time growing anything. Usually the person preaching on this passage goes into great detail about these soils, and eventually asks the question: What kind of soil are you?

We are supposed to be the good soil that hears God's words and allows it to flourish in our lives and bear fruit. And we all make ourselves feel guilty because at different times in our lives we tend to be weedy soils or thorny soils or rocky soils. And we wonder if we are good enough for God.

However, I think we are starting at the wrong place in this parable. The starting point is not the soils; it's the sower or the farmer. This farmer is not very good at farming. In fact, this farmer is being very wasteful.

I am sure there are many gardeners here. I remember planting a flower and vegetable garden in a friend's yard. He dug up the soil for me. I put in lots of compost, then carefully planted the seeds in rows. I didn't waste one seed. I had

a friend who put stakes at each end of her plot and strung a string between the stakes. This enabled her to make perfectly straight rows in her garden. Perfectly and methodically placed seeds. Did you garden like that?

Not this dumb farmer! He is tossing his seeds everywhere. The seed is landing along the road, on the rocky gravel, in weeds, and deep in the thorn bushes. Keep in mind that Jesus' audience was an agricultural society, and they would have picked up on this waste of seed. Their initial reaction would likely have been, "Why is he planting the garden that way?" This is wasteful.

In Jesus' parables, things often represent something else. In this parable, the farmer is God. The seed is the Gospel message and good news of Jesus Christ, the love and grace and mercy of God for us. And God is flinging this seed everywhere.

Why is God so wasteful with the Gospel seeds?

Perhaps we shouldn't use the word wasteful. The word to be used is generous. This Farmer is bad at planting a garden because God is just so generous. Overflowing, spilling it all over the world generous. God throws the Gospel seed, the good news of the presence of Christ far and wide.

This careless God is taking his gospel seeds of love and grace and mercy, tossing it anywhere and everywhere, even if it lands on rebellious, rocky hearts, or hate-filled, violent hearts or hearts that will have nothing to do with God. It is given in the midst of troubles and woes, faults and failings.

A lot of it will fall in places where it never takes root. Some of it will fall in places where it gets a good start but doesn't last. Some of it will fall in places where it gets choked out by competing interests. But God doesn't care where that gospel seed lands. Well, maybe I shouldn't say God doesn't care. God cares that it lands everywhere. Because you never know where it will take root.

Let me give you an example from my sabbatical. A couple of weeks before I went on sabbatical, Prince the musician and singer died. I grew up in Minneapolis, lived there 46 years. Prince was part of the fabric of our lives. He was always in the

news, spotted here, concert there. I remember when Paisley Park, his home and studio, was built.

So when he died, it hit me pretty hard; I felt like I had lost part of my community even though I haven't lived in Minneapolis for 16 years. I was talking with Eloise Fredrickson about this because she is a Minnesota girl, too. Being from a different generation than me, the death she took hard was Elvis. Some of you have other musicians who were the soundtracks of your lives, and when that musician died, it was loss.

I grew up with a pretty legalistic form of Christianity where behavior was all important. So when Prince's music came out, I wasn't supposed to listen to it because it was considered raunchy. Well, not considered, it was! So I bought it in secret. I remember dancing wildly in the living room with my housemates to "Let's Go Crazy."

When my sabbatical started, I began to listen to more of Prince's music. Not just the hits, but deep into his catalog. He was so prolific that he produced 39 albums in 40 years. People began to flood YouTube with such things as Prince TV appearances, concerts, interviews, videos for his songs (when he was alive, Prince didn't allow these things).

And I discovered something. I learned God was throwing a lot of those Gospel seeds into Prince's camp. I discovered that he wrote a lot of Christian music. Now keep in mind this was the man whose music was responsible for warning labels on albums. This was the man who simulated sex on stage. This was man who wore a thong on stage with thigh high stockings and boots. Preachers decried his music, that it was from the devil. A friend of mine just sent me a tribute magazine with the title, "His Royal Badness."

Yet in the midst of that music and sexual antics, those Gospel seeds that God was throwing in Prince's camp began to take root. A song called "The Cross" written at the same time as the warning labels (circa mid 1980s) and placed next to a song called "It's Gonna Be a Beautiful Night" on his album (the weedy soil next to the Gospel seed):

*Black day, stormy night
No love, no hope in sight
Don't cry, he is coming
Don't die without knowing the cross*

*We all have our problems
Some big, some are small
Soon all of our problems
Will be taken by the cross*

Seeds beginning to sprout in that weedy, thorny, sexy soil.

From “Anna Stesia” written in 1988 from an album called *Lovesexy*:

*Maybe, maybe, maybe I could learn to love
If I was just closer to somethin'
Closer to your higher self
I don't know
Closer to heaven (Maybe) closer to God
Save me Jesus, I've been a fool
How could I forget that you are the rule
You are my God, I am Your child
From now on, for you I shall be wild
I shall be quick I shall be strong
I'll tell Your story, no matter how long*

Gospel seeds growing in a weedy, thorny, sexy life.

Those seeds grew into plants, and Prince’s faith became stronger and more vocal. In his concerts, he began to tell people to open the Bible and let God guide them. From “Beautiful, Loved and Blessed” which received a Grammy nomination in 2006:

*When you found me I was just a piece of clay
I was formless, you gave me a new name
With the breath of life I now live abundantly
All I needed was the potter's hand
And the blood on Calvary*

*If I were to ever write down my life story
I could truly say with all the fame and glory
I was just a piece of clay in need of the potter's hand...
'Cause you made me confess that I am
Beautiful, loved and blessed
When you're free you're really free indeed
All you gotta do is just plant the seed*

Those Gospel seeds that were thrown Prince's way began to bear fruit not just in Prince, but those around him. One of them was Prince's drummer in the 80s, Sheila E., whom he made very famous. She wrote an autobiography in 2014 (*The Beat of My Own Drum*) and in it she tells about meeting Jesus in 2002. She begins her acknowledgments in the book this way: "Thank you first and foremost to my Heavenly Father, my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I thank you for my life, my breath, and for waking me up this morning. Thank you for your sacrifice and for the countless blessings you've bestowed upon me. I am your eternal servant, and I know that with you, all things are possible. "

Gospel seeds growing strong in a weedy, thorny life.

Prince's sister, Tyka, was a prostitute and addicted to cocaine. In the year 2000, Prince placed her in rehab. She became a Christian, and produced 6 Gospel albums. Her Facebook page says she now works for the Kingdom of God and studies at the University of the Holy Spirit.

Gospel seeds sprouting in a weedy, thorny life.

As I listened and watched some of Prince's Christian music on YouTube, I read some of the comments. One comment: "I was an atheist until I began to listen to Prince's music. I now believe." Almost every article and magazine admitted that Prince is in heaven. Prince once said about death, "When the call comes, I am ready." That magazine tribune that called Prince "His Royal Badness," stated "Prince surely reflected the brilliance of God – and by all accounts still does." Another one said, "Heaven just got a lot funkier."

Gospel seeds sprouting in a weedy, thorny life and affecting everyone around him.

Those gospel seeds are everywhere. In our schools. In our churches. In our communities. In our businesses. In our government. With the homeless. The refugee. Even with that person who is thinking about committing the next mass murder, even in the one that just happened in Turkey at wedding celebration killing 50 people. So pray. Pray for those gospel seeds to find a bit of soil, even if it is rocky or thorny. Because those gospel seeds can flourish in the most unlikely places.

For us, this means we are to be reckless in our scattering of the Gospel seed just like our Creator. Be less concerned about efficiency and more concerned about extravagance. Toss your gospel message of love and grace and mercy abundantly. Throw your prayers and your ministry everywhere because it will eventually find good soil. The Sower will make sure of that.

Now, remember at the beginning of my message I said did something on my sabbatical that I have never done and thought I would never do. At the age of 62, for the first time in my life, I got a tattoo!

The hard part about getting a tattoo is walking into a tattoo parlor for the first time. I almost walked away, but I had Valerie with me. I brought her with me because I knew I was going to chicken out and she would make sure I didn't.

My tattoo is inspired by one of Prince's most popular songs, one that he sang at every concert and one that everyone sings now: Purple Rain. Most people don't know what the purple rain is. After Prince's death, one woman stood outside Paisley Park and said, "I don't know what purple rain means. All I know is I want a lot of it."

The meaning was clarified from the woman guitarist in Prince's band who originally played the song. She said purple rain means a new beginning. Purple is the color of the sky at the dawn of a new day. The rain is a cleansing. Prince later

said it was baptism. Purple rain is a new beginning and cleansing. So I have purple rain drops in my tattoo.

During my sabbatical, I went home to Minneapolis to visit family and friends. While there, I visited Paisley Park. There is a chain link fence around the compound but people are still visiting and placing memorial items on this fence – paintings, collages, poems, and one of my favorites: a cross with purple flowers.

So on my tattoo, purple rain is falling on a cross with a flower growing up and around the cross. “To signify new life, “ said my tattoo artist. My tattoo is about new life in Christ, inspired by Prince.

My tattoo is on my ankle. I know you can't see it, and I know you won't get down on your hands and knees to view it, so I have helped you out. The picture on the front of the bulletin is my tattoo. I hope that people will ask me about my tattoo and I can tell them the story behind it and about new life in Christ.

What can you do to nurture the Gospel seeds already present in each person you meet? Amen.