

(PP1) Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“The Most Influential Person Who NEVER Lived”

A farmer, ragged and barefooted, was standing one day on the steps of his run-down shack. A stranger stopped for a drink of water and he asked: “How is your cotton coming along?” The farmer replied, “Ain’t got any.”

The exchange continued, “Did you plant any?” “Nope, afraid of boll weevils.” “Well, how is your corn?” “Didn’t plant any, afraid there’d be no rain.” “Well, how are your potatoes?” “Ain’t got any; scared of the potato bugs.” “Really, well what *did* you plant?” “Nothing, I just played it safe.” **PAUSE** Now, I have to ask: If you’re a farmer, how safe is it, to not have *any* crops at all?” Not real safe, right!?

Let me ask you: In this story, does it matter if this farmer is a real person, or not? Not really. Whether the farmer is a real person or not doesn’t change the fact that the story about this farmer has the power to influence our thinking, and perhaps our behavior.

We can learn a lot from people who never lived, or who really never existed – people like Nanny McFee, Indiana Jones, Tom Sawyer, Ebenezer Scrooge, Sherlock Holmes, and Atticus Finch, to name a few. Although they are famous, none of them are real, except in the pages of literature. They are *fictional* characters, but that does not mean they are not *influential* characters. It only means that they never really lived – like the Farmer who planted some seed in today’s Scripture lesson.

In its December 10, 2013 issue, *Time Magazine* tackled the question, “Who Is The Most Influential Person Who Ever Lived?” To figure this out, they used a computer to aggregate “millions of traces of opinions,” similar to the way Google ranks web pages. The top five most influential

persons who ever lived are not terribly surprising: Jesus, Napoleon, Muhammad, William Shakespeare, and Abraham Lincoln. Going down the list, however, things got a bit more controversial. For example, Ronald Reagan (32) beat out Paul the Apostle (34). And they both crushed Saint Peter (65).

Time Magazine also produced a list of the 100 most influential people *who never lived*? People who never took a breath, except in the pages of fiction? To highlight these characters' influence on society and culture, *Time Magazine* said that “without such figures, we couldn't speak of a man having an Oedipus Complex, or the Peter Pan Syndrome. We couldn't describe women as Cinderella or Madame Bovary. We couldn't say we were afraid of government being Big Brother, or science producing Dr. Frankenstein's Monster.”

Our lives are much richer because of these people *who never lived*. The Bible too, contains quite a few characters who actually never lived, but who have the power to influence our lives. The Prodigal Son comes to mind, but the fictional Farmer who planted the seed is one of the most significant figures Jesus creates in his wide-ranging collection of parables.

(PP2) In the parable of the Farmer scattering the seed, Jesus begins, “Listen(!) A farmer went out to plant some seeds.” We can visualize the Farmer in the field, and as we do so, our imaginations are sparked. “As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them.”

Now, notice that the Farmer is just tossing the seed wherever he likes. He is not digging holes, or covering the seeds with dirt. When some seeds hit the path, and are gobbled up by the birds, he just keeps spreading his seed.

“Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock,” Jesus said. “The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn’t have deep roots, they died.” The Farmer does not seem to care where the seed goes, throwing it on completely inhospitable, rocky ground. Not surprisingly, these seeds scorch and die.

But the Farmer keeps moving along, and Jesus goes on to say that “other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!” And then Jesus says, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.” Finally, a few of the seeds hit good soil and *voila* – they bring forth an enormous harvest!

What strikes you immediately about the character of the Farmer? He seems a bit careless, doesn’t he? Professor of New Testament theology, Donald H. Juel says, “The farmer in the story is not overly cautious. He throws seed everywhere, apparently confident there will be a harvest in spite of the losses.” He simply keeps spreading his seed, ***believing*** that growth will come.

(PP3) So what does the Farmer tell us about Jesus? This influential person who never lived has something to teach us about the most significant person who *ever* lived. Jesus “is not cautious about where he preaches, and on whom he invests his time.” (Juel)

Jesus simply keeps spreading the word of the kingdom of God, even though it lands on religious people who wonder if he is demon possessed (12:22-24), on disciples who struggle to understand him (16:21-26), and on at least one young rich man who cannot part with his possessions in order to follow Jesus (19:16-22). The Farmer keeps spreading his seed, and Jesus keeps spreading the word.

In many ways, Jesus is like Atticus Finch, one of the top fictional characters in history. Atticus is the “hero” of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill*

a Mockingbird. In the opening pages of the book, Atticus' daughter, Scout states that she and her brother, Jem found their father to be "satisfactory."

However, Atticus was much more than satisfactory – he was wise, patient, forgiving and brave. *TIME* magazine editor, David Von Drehle says that Atticus "is the man who will do what is right when the world is saying he is wrong." In the story, Atticus is a white lawyer who defends a black man in a racist, Southern town. A character in the novel says to Scout and Jem, "There are some men in this world who were born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father is one of them."

Atticus stands up for justice when it would be much easier to let the standards of the community prevail, and yet "he isn't alienated from his neighbors." Von Drehle says, "He loves his backward, racist, fearful community, even as his heart breaks over its shortcomings."

Atticus is described as wise, patient, forgiving and brave. A man born to do our unpleasant jobs for us, and who loves us completely – even as his heart breaks over our shortcomings. Sounds a lot like Jesus, doesn't it? The Parable of the Farmer teaches us that Jesus spreads good seed everywhere, and he does so knowing that most of it is going to be wasted or destroyed.

As followers of Jesus, perhaps we should be doing ministry and mission in the very same way. Perhaps "the same careless abandon should characterize our church's ministry – spreading "good news" without carefully calculating the potential for success." (Juel)

As the church, we are called to welcome others as Jesus has welcomed us, and we are called to spread his message of unconditional love, and unlimited grace. After all, Jesus simply calls us to be faithful to him and to the kingdom of God, not to be successful in a worldly sense.

(PP4) But there is more to this parable. When Jesus explains the meaning of the story to his disciples, the focus suddenly shifts from the

Farmer to the Soil. In fact, some scholars call this story “The Parable of the Four Soils.”

When the emphasis is on the Soil, the message is that we should all be “good soil,” or people who hear the word of the kingdom of God and understand it. Jesus promises that the person who does so will “produce a great harvest for God’s kingdom!”

In his parable, Jesus is saying, “When you hear the word of the kingdom – the truth about God and his Christ – don’t be like the *footpath* soil, which is susceptible to the Evil one, who comes and snatches away the word of God that is planted in your heart. (v. 19) And, don’t be the *rocky ground*, where God’s Word does not take root, and so you fall away. (v. 21) And, don’t be *thorny* soil, hearing the truth of God’s word, but allowing the cares of this life to crowd God out, so that you produce no fruit for God’s kingdom. **PAUSE**

(PP5) So, what is it that Jesus commands us to do? In a word: “Listen!” (v. 3). That is what Jesus says at the beginning of the parable, and it is certainly something that we can do as active disciples. Listen to the story of the Farmer, and learn that Jesus is incredibly generous in the way that he shares the word of the kingdom with all the people of the world.

Listen and learn that God’s Word is incredibly fruitful, and that a great harvest is guaranteed. Listen and learn that the coming kingdom of God is not something that we can control. Instead, “everything depends upon what God will do.” (Juel)

The Farmer shows us that Jesus is in charge. Jesus is the one who makes sure that the word of the kingdom takes root, and produces a great harvest. Our job is to trust in what Jesus is doing, and share his message (or plant seeds of truth!) with joy and generosity.

If we do, we will experience the influence of a person who never lived – the Farmer. We will also be following our Savior, who really lived and died, and then rose to be with us forever. May God bless you all, Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We come before you in prayer, loving Creator, and we thank you for the seeds of faith you have planted in us. We thank you for the Sunday school teachers, preachers, choir directors and parents who encouraged the growth of your word in us. Grant us the courage, we pray, to release the things in our lives which choke us and prevent us from growth. You know what hinders us, loving God so help us to clear a pathway for you.

Nourish us with your gift of the Word, so that we might be able to give to others your patience, your hope and your love – to help others to truly be free from the weeds that stifle their lives. Thank you for the gift of your grace, which allows us to flourish in spite of ourselves.

In this, the middle of summer, some of us are ready to give up because it is too hot, too windy or too uncomfortable, and we confess we would rather stop growing, and giving, and just rest in the shade. Keep us mindful, O God, that you did not call us to be cool and comfortable but rather hot and bothered by the needs of a weary world.

O God, you are always present to us; let us now be present to you that we might be fed and nourished and therefore able to be present to others. We pray all this in the name of the one who came that we might know what a life of love looks like, Jesus, the Christ, who taught us to pray....

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever, Amen.

Hymns

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

In the Bulb there Is a Flower

Pass It On

Sermon Notes

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- Our lives are much richer because of people *who never lived*. The Bible contains quite a few characters who actually never lived, but who have the power to influence our lives. The fictional Farmer who planted seed is one of the most significant figures Jesus creates in his wide-ranging collection of parables.
- In the parable of the Farmer scattering the seed, Jesus begins, “Listen(!) A farmer went out to plant some seeds.”
- What does the Farmer tell us about Jesus? Jesus is not cautious about where he preaches, and on whom he invests his time.
- As the church, we are called to welcome others as Jesus has welcomed us, and we are called to spread his message of unconditional love, and unlimited grace.
- When the emphasis is on the Soil, the message is that we should all be “good soil,” or people who hear the word of the kingdom of God and understand it. Jesus promises that the person who does so will “produce a great harvest for God’s kingdom!”
- What is it that Jesus commands us to do? In a word: “Listen!”
- *Listen and learn* – Jesus is incredibly generous in the way that he shares the word of the kingdom with all the people of the world.
- *Listen and learn* – God’s Word is incredibly fruitful, a great harvest is guaranteed.
- *Listen and learn* – the coming kingdom of God is not something that we can control. Instead, everything depends on what God will do.
- The Farmer shows us that Jesus is in charge. Jesus is the one who makes sure that the word of the kingdom takes root, and produces a great harvest. Our job is to trust in what Jesus is doing, and share his message with joy and generosity.

May God bless you!