

“Summertime Stories” (revised)  
“The Prodigal Sower”

7/16/2017, St. Ann  
Fr. Jim Plough

In Jesus’ time, the great majority of people were illiterate. They depended upon hearing a message. They were unable to read a text and reflect upon it in private. That is why Jesus spoke and taught by using stories, images rather than concepts. As a tool for learning, stories can be highly effective because they are open to many levels of meaning, as our gospel story today clearly demonstrates. Stories are challenging and diverse and rich. Moreover, stories sometimes have a hidden hook in them, messages that only become apparent after you think about them for a long time.

Here are two stories that appear to be entertaining, but in hindsight, may confront us in a way we hadn’t imagined. Soren Kierkegaard, famous Danish philosopher and critic of organized religion, tells the story of how he happened to attend a service in a rather ornate church with a marble floor and velvet pews. He watched as the sun came shining through the stained-glass windows. The minister, dressed in an elegant robe, opened the golden gilded Bible, marked it with a silk bookmark, and proceeded to proclaim: “Jesus tells us that If anyone wants to be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Kierkegaard found the scene rather incongruous, ornate surroundings for a very abstemious message. He looked around and nobody was laughing.

You may wonder why there should have been laughter. It may hit you later, when you consider the distance between the often-elegant trappings of formal religion and the one who had nowhere to lay his head.

A second story. A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk even though he could have beaten the red light

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by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious, and she honked her horn angrily, screaming in frustration and shouting obscenities as she fumbled with her cell phone. She was still in mid-rant when she heard a tap on her window and looked up to see a stern police officer. He ordered her out of the car with her hands up and took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours she was escorted by a very embarrassed arresting officer back to the desk and given her personal effects. The officer said, "I'm really very sorry. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn and cursing a blue streak at the guy in front of you. Then I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Well, naturally," he continued, "I assumed you had stolen the car."

You may find this story rather incongruous, too, but it does make us think. The circumstances don't point to a harmonious lifestyle on the part of the lady burdened by road rage.

Coming back to a third story today, Jesus' story about the sower. This too has an element of incongruity. Why was the sower scattering seed in a helter-skelter way? Couldn't he have been more careful? No farmer would scatter seed on the roadway or among rocks and thorns, only on rich soil. This story should be entitled "The Prodigal Sower!"

Jesus delighted in telling stories about people who were prodigal, lavish in doling out compassion and care which seemed misplaced or extravagant. There was a prodigal shepherd in charge of a hundred sheep who abandoned them to rescue

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the lost one. There was a prodigal foreigner, an enemy who risked stopping to care for a wounded Jewish traveler, when his own people passed him by. There was a prodigal father who welcomed home a wayward son who had wasted his whole inheritance. Today we learn of a prodigal farmer who needlessly let seed be wasted for the sake of showing that a harvest was still possible.

God chose to sow his Son everywhere, not just on the good soil of a chosen people. God has given his Son to everyone. He’s scattered the seed of his Son not only for Catholics, but for Baptists and Presbyterians, too. And not just for Christians, but for Muslims and Jews and Buddhists and Hindus. And for atheists and agnostics, too.

God just isn’t like us, at all! We’d be careful about where we sowed our seed. But God sows it indiscriminately, almost as though it didn’t matter where it goes. It goes everywhere! We’d be stingy with our seed, worried we might run out of it. But God seems to have no end of it, an inexhaustible supply, so he can be much more generous than we’d be. We’d be worried about making sure the seed bore fruit. But God seems to feel that his seed, his Son, has already been fruitful – that he’s fruitful no matter where he’s sown! And we’d be sure not to waste any seed on those who don’t deserve it. But God seems just as happy to “waste” his Son Jesus on everybody.

Our job as Christians, of course, is to become good soil for Jesus the Word. But our job is also to imitate Jesus – in what he said, and in what he did. Stop worrying about who gets the seed, and who doesn’t. That’s the sower’s job. And he doesn’t seem to care!