

“Go Figure”

The Kingdom of God is as if a farmer rose early one morning to plant corn. He climbed into the air conditioned cab of his John Deer 9030 Series tractor, equipped with a GPS guidance system and field documentation programs, TouchSet Hydraulic control, implement management system, a 13 liter engine with electronic fuel unit injection and an 18-speed Power Shift transmission.

With planter in tow, he planted Pioneer High Yield hybrid seed on the parking lot at Linway Plaza and on a one-mile section of State Road 119. He then drove his big green rig on to the Black Squirrel Golf course where he planted corn on all eighteen tee boxes, fairways and greens. When he finished he went south on County Road 15 where he planted the rest of the seed on 250 acres of prime Elkhart County farmland.

When his work was done the farmer went home, ate dinner, went to bed and fell asleep trusting the seed would sprout and grow, though he had no idea how. He must have been a member of the FFA in high school -- The Future Farmer Failures of America. Corn can't grow on asphalt. Grass is the only crop that grows on a golf course. The only way to get a harvest is to plant the seed where it belongs-- in fertile soil.

What a ridiculous illustration. Yet we don't bat an eye at Jesus' parable of the sower. Mark placed this parable at the beginning of chapter four. A sower went out to sow, slinging seeds everywhere. He flung seeds on the hard path where the birds ate it. He flung seed on rocky ground where the sun scorched it and the wind blew it away. He flung seed into thickets of thorns where it sprouted and was strangled. Finally, he flung it into good soil where it sprouted, took root and yielded a hundred-fold harvest.

“This is what life in God’s kingdom is like,” Jesus said. It doesn’t seem like an efficient way to operate a Kingdom, wasting seed on walking trails and rock and thorn patches. I know next to nothing about agriculture, but I know a lousy farmer when I see one. Yet this, according to Jesus, is how God works.

A typical interpretation of this passage equates the kinds of ground with hearts that are more or less receptive to the incursions of God. Sermons on this parable conclude with an admonition not to have stone hearts in which God’s word can’t take hold. The trouble with this interpretation is that rock cannot turn itself to soft soil. Nothing is implied about making ourselves more fertile so we can receive God’s seed. The parable is not about what we do to create new life. It’s about what God does through the means God chooses.

“A sower went out to sow.” He broadcast seed over here and over there, then went about his business. The seed didn’t need a cheerleader. The seed and soil didn’t have to be told what to do. The sower didn’t pull up the plants every day to see how they were doing. While he slept and rose day after day, the earth produced of itself, ***first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain.*** Exactly how it happened he did not know.

When I had a garden I worked manure into it. I hoed weeds. I fought grubs and groundhogs. What the garden needed most, however, was beyond my control -- things like temperature, rain, and sunlight.

There was a community garden on the property of my first church. One year it barely rained all of May and June. The gardens withered, and church members asked me to work my connections. “You better pray for rain.” I told them I’d get right on it. Over the next three days it rained nine inches and the gardens flooded. I liked gardening, but without a guarantee of a good harvest, it was too chancy.

Preachers understand this dynamic. Talk to a preacher who has been at it a while and he or she will tell you they know less about preaching now than when they started. I studied homiletics in seminary. I learned communication theory. I “practice preached” before professors and peers, and the memory gives me nightmares to this day. I was blessed to have an intern year learning the methods and moves of a master preacher.

When I began in ministry, I thought I knew what I was doing, but not any more. I work hard writing sermons that are biblically rooted, theologically sound, and applicable to life. I dig for the right words and supportive material to make the message come alive. Before I preach I silently pray an age-old prayer: *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my Lord and God.”* But a sermon isn’t God’s word until God makes it his word.

I’ve stopped trying to predict responses to preaching. I think I’ve written a soaring eagle, but it ends up a dead duck. When I’m embarrassed about wasting twenty minutes of your precious life on a strung together, half-developed sermon sprinkled with lame illustrations someone will say, *“God touched me through that sermon.”* I no longer ask, “What did I say to do that?” Most of the time you hear what I didn’t say.” Go figure.

My offering and your receptivity play a part, but ultimately it’s a matter of what God decides to do with it. I have no idea of what will happen in the air between my speech and your hearing. I just go about my business, and somehow, by a stroke of God’s grace, something happens.

God the sower casts the seed of his word everywhere. Most of it is wasted on people like us who don’t hear or choose not to hear, or brush it off and go about our business, or receive it and let it shrivel up because other matters are more important. God is not hindered. You’ve heard me say that God doesn’t care about statistics. He leaves ninety-nine sheep to look for a lost one. Jesus said there is great joy in heaven if only one person comes forward at a Billy Graham Crusade.

I recall a conversation I had a few years ago with my boyhood buddy, Mike. *“I got a phone call from Jerry McKenzie,”* he said. The mention of his name sent a shudder through me. Jerry was the undisputed bully of the Mark Street Elementary School. He was incorrigible. He was smoking by the sixth grade. He wrote the same reminder on the calendar every day of the month. *“Pound somebody.”* Whenever there was a fight, Jerry was in it. The threat of being taken to the principle’s office didn’t faze him. He didn’t question authority, he defied it. Teachers prayed not to get him in their class. Jerry was the only elementary school child ever voted, *“Most Likely to End Up in Prison.”*

Mike asked Jerry, *“Where have you been all these years?”* It turns out the early predictions were right. Jerry spent several years in the Ohio State Penitentiary. *“I was out of control,”* he said. While I was locked up I had a lot of time to think about what I had become. I thought about all the people I had hurt. This will sound like one of those, *“I-Got-God-Behind”* bars stories, but I did. I went to a worship service just to break the boredom. A fellow inmate gave his testimony, and something hit me. I knew I needed another chance at a new life.”

After hearing Jerry’s story Mike said, *“That’s great, but why are you calling me?”* It turns out he was calling everyone he could think of that he had hurt, asking forgiveness for things that happened thirty years ago. I’m still waiting for my call.

Jerry McKenzie wasn’t the most likely soil in which God would plant a seed. God only knows how much of it was cast his way.