

THE PAY-OFF FOR SHARING

Scriptures: Mark 4:1-9, 26-32

I once read a story about a missionary who was looking out her second floor window and noticed a shabbily dressed man down on the street leaning against a lamp post. The man looked so poor and so forlorn the missionary decided to give him some money. She put ten dollars in an envelope and wrote on it the words “Don’t despair.” Then she called to him from the window and tossed him the envelope. The man read the message, looked in the envelope, and tipped his hat to the missionary as he went on down the street. The next day the missionary answered a knock at her door, and there stood the same shabbily dressed man smiling as he handed her a roll of ten dollar bills. “What’s this?” she asked. “That’s the sixty bucks you won, lady” the man said. “Don’t Despair paid five to one.” (Charles Swindoll, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, p. 156.)

I think that would be a great title for the parable we read this morning from Mark, chapter 4. A farmer—what Jesus calls a “sower”—plants his field. But he is rather indiscriminate with his seed. Some of it lands on the road. Of course it can’t grow in the road; it ends up being eaten by the birds. He throws other seed on rocky ground. There it puts down some feeble shallow roots, but when it gets hot the plant turns brown and crinkly and dies. Other seed is thrown among the weeds. There the soil is better, and the seed manages to put down roots, but when it tries to grow above ground, the weeds choke it out.

When I was in Potlatch, we studied this parable in a Bible study group, and after reading it I asked the group what they thought of the story. There was silence, and then one of the men said, “Well, the guy is not a very good farmer.”

It’s true. In Potlatch the guy would have gone bankrupt, unless he was on the federal farm program. But in Jesus’ parable, a miracle happens. Even though he wastes much of his seed, some of it finds its way into good soil and produces a crop bigger than he ever imagined. It’s like tossing 10 bucks to a bum and getting back sixty. Don’t Despair pays five to one.

In case we don’t get it, Jesus explains the parable later in the chapter. The farmer, he says, is like a preacher or anyone else that is trying to share the good news of God’s love. Much of the time your effort seems wasted.

On Wednesday mornings I lead a short Bible study and prayer time in the chapel at the House of Charity. Every week it is a different experience. One week I had four people at the Bible study. I was excited because some weeks I only have two. We were just starting to read the scripture passage when another person walked in. I thought, “Wow, five people! We’re on a roll.” But as soon as the 5th person walked in and sat down, two of the others in the room looked at him, got up, and left. Suddenly I was losing ground. This week I started the Bible study with one person. We had just begun reading the Bible passage when two other people walked in. I got all excited. Then both of them went over to a bench in the chapel, laid down, and went to sleep. At least in our church people sleep sitting up. Sometimes when it comes to sharing faith the seed seems wasted.

But it isn't. That is Jesus' point. Later in Mark chapter 4, Jesus tells another parable. He says, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." We may think our seed is wasted. We may think that our efforts to share our faith with others are to no avail, but if you keep flinging out that seed, if you keep inviting people to church, if you keep bringing your children and sometimes their friends to Sunday School, youth group, KICK, if you keep teaching or helping in those classes yourself, if you keep praying for people and caring about them and listening to them even if you are not talking, you may be surprised what will happen.

Let me share some stories. The first Presbyterian missionaries landed in Korea about 120 years ago. The first Presbyterian converts in Korea were a mystic, a saloon keeper, and a man who had two wives. It sounds almost like the House of Charity. But from that beginning the Presbyterian Church in Korea exploded. There are now over 9 million Presbyterians in Korea, which means there are four times as many Presbyterians in Korea as in the United States. Some of them are sending missionaries to us.

A similar thing happened in Thailand. The first Presbyterian missionaries arrived in Thailand in the 1850s. They got there by elephant. In her book *To the Ends of the Earth* Marge Carpenter, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church, tells the story. She writes,

The first two missionaries were from North Carolina and Pittsburgh. They worked for a year and they had only three converts. The King of Siam executed two of the converts because they refused to work for him on Sunday. That's when I would have gotten on my elephant and gone home. But they stayed, and the two executed converts were considered martyrs. At about that time, the Prince of Siam gave the missionaries an island. A mad elephant had died on the island, and the prince thought it was a place of the devil, so he gave it to the Presbyterian missionaries.

Marge goes on to say that the Presbyterians started a hospital for leprosy patients on the island, and that hospital is still there to this day. So is a university started by Presbyterians, and a nursing school, a couple of high schools, several churches and a seminary. All started by two Presbyterians and an elephant. Don't Despair pays five to one.

In 1958, fifty years ago this year, Hamblen Park began its first full year as a church. The total pledged income to the church in 1958 was \$5055.22. Harold and Florence Byers, charter members of our church, told me this story. Some of you have heard this story, but I think it bears repeating for those who are new. One evening the church treasurer was going over the books, and Florence asked him how it was going. He said to her, "Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we have \$12 left in the bank." That was the good news! "The bad news is that I haven't paid any of the bills yet."

That is how life is in a new church development. It is a struggle to build a church from scratch. But other Presbyterian churches from all over the country kept sowing seeds to help Hamblen Park get started. In the first six years of this church's life it received \$47,000 in mission giving from Presbyterians all over the country through the Presbyterian General

Assembly. In addition the land on which we are located and the first building, what we now call the chapel, was given to the church debt free, paid for by General Assembly mission funds. Presbyterians from all over the country sowed seeds in this place. Did they know what kind of soil we had out here? Did they know that one day this church would have 800 members and pledged income of over \$600,000? Did they know that 50 years later this church would give back more to Presbyterian mission in one year than it received in the first six years of its life? Did they know that? Of course not. They were sowing seeds, and the result is what we have here today. Don't Despair paid five to one.

Now it is our turn to plant seeds down in Latah Valley. Last year our church gave \$10,000 to help the Latah Valley church get started. We will do about that much again this year. The General Assembly gave \$33,000 last year for Latah Valley, and many churches in our Presbytery also helped. In addition our Presbytery is launching a capital campaign to pay for the land on which the new church will one day be built. We are sowing seeds. Will they grow? There is only one way to find out.

But note this. The sower is not throwing out just any kind of seed. The sower is sowing the word of God, and God's word never comes back empty. So don't underestimate the power of what we are doing down in Latah Valley or here at Hamblen or in your own family and among your friends and co-workers. Every time you worship God and invite someone to come with you to worship, every time you teach Sunday School or bring someone to Sunday School, every time you listen to someone with the heart and compassion of Christ—yes, sometimes you sow God's word by listening and not just talking—every time we make lunches for the House of Charity, which people are doing today right after church, every time we give mittens or hats to the Mission Community Outreach Center or bus passes to the Liberty Park Child Development Center, every time we deliver meals on wheels or help build a Habitat House or give to the One Great Hour of Sharing, every time we help others, teach others, care for others in the name of Christ, including our own families, we are sowing seeds. We are planting the word of God, the Good News of Jesus Christ into human hearts. And that, friends, is a powerful thing to do, because Don't Despair pays five to one, and sometimes even more.

- Ken Onstot
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