

Going Viral  
May 11, 2014  
Mark 4:1-20

This morning's reading is one of a very small number of Jesus' parables that is included in three Gospels. The Parable of the Sower relies on imagery that was commonplace in an agrarian society.

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.

And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.' "

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them.

And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.

And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Ever Present One, help us to focus on the input available through all of our senses so that we might more fully encounter you. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

This morning things are different than usual. For you, maybe that difference started well before you got in a vehicle and made your way to church . . . Or maybe it started moments ago when you saw something unfamiliar happen as Pastor Ron moved a screen onto the chancel . . . Or maybe it will begin the moment I hit play . . .

<Show [World's Toughest Job](#) Video<sup>1</sup>>

While not a religious holiday, many Christian worship services in our country today will include something special to recognize Mother's Day. People will give thanks for mothers and for those who have provided motherly guidance.

Hopefully through your participation in the pastoral prayer, and your engagement with this video you are thinking positively about the holiday and more specifically about individuals who have mothered you all along your life journey.

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<sup>1</sup> World's Toughest Job - #worldstoughestjob - Official Video. Created by cardstore.com and available at <http://youtu.be/HB3xM93rXbY> (as of May 7, 2014, the video has been viewed 17.8 million times)

My reasons for including the video in this morning's message go beyond Mother's Day. It isn't just a cute video; it is a viral video.

To be considered viral, a video must reach the masses. While experts disagree just how many views it takes to count as viral, 1 million views is a good place to start.

That is now, but let me return to then – to the time of our parable and to the story itself. Jesus told the Parable of the Sower, and he provided an allegorical interpretation of it. The Sower sows the Word of God, and what happens next depends on the kind of soil.

Only one soil type is capable of achieving the desired results. The translation I read – the one in your pew Bibles – explains that best soil yielded an incredible increase ranging between 30-fold and 100-fold. A contemporary paraphrase says it “produces a harvest beyond their wildest dreams.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was explaining the growth with visual images and numeric specifications designed to make a point to his agrarian audience. If he were telling the same parable today, I am sure he would have selected different imagery. I can imagine him ending a modern day version of this parable by suggesting that the messages has the potential to “go viral.”

You and I get that companies spend money to create advertising, and to ensure that their creative ads get seen by many people. Some here even understand how companies leverage their resources to increase the odds that content they create will go viral.

That is good for them, but not so helpful for us. Smaller congregations don't have those kinds of resources at their disposal. But, thankfully they are not needed. The beauty of social media is that anything that people value or find interesting has the potential to go viral.

Gold Hill Lutheran Church is a congregation in Montana with an average Sunday morning worship attendance that is just a little lower than ours is here at the United Church. Earlier this year, a video of their pastor leading worship went viral.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:20, *The Message*.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Smith. “The 1 Minute Worship Service.”

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2014/01/20/the-1-minute-worship-service/>>

<Show [49er Fan Pastor Tim's 1-Minute Worship Service](#) Video><sup>4</sup>

While some of you may occasionally wish for a 1-minute worship service, I am not able to meet those expectations. And, even though there was initially some confusion on social media, I want to be sure you know Pastor Tim didn't leave church after the video camera stopped recording. After making this unusual announcement, he then went on to lead a very normal full-length service of worship.

Since I have studied social media, I am qualified to teach a "how to" lesson on creating a viral video. I could list for you those things that experts claim you should do and a number they advise against doing in order to increase the odds your content will go viral. I would, however, have to issue an important disclaimer: many of the people who create the viral content you know and love didn't ever imagine it would go viral, and certainly didn't follow the best practices.

I can try to explain the Sower in our parable, but must admit it features a rather odd farmer. What kind of farmer sows any and everywhere? Seed wasn't cheap. Time was limited. Why sow on ground that clearly wasn't ready to yield a healthy crop?

If you are like me you want instant results. Not only do we want to see immediate evidence of our labor, but we also want the end result to be on a grand scale. We want everyone to know that things went as we planned. We want to set the stage for it to go viral.

Thankfully, God is far wiser. Who are we to determine who is ready to hear and respond to the message of God's love? Just because people look a certain way doesn't necessarily mean they match a specific soil type. We must be careful not to stereotype based on outward appearance.

We must sow with abandon. We must sow recklessly. We must sow wherever we go.

David Buttrick, long-time professor of preaching at the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, summarizes the key takeaway of this parable for us as the church today: "speak the Gospel and trust God. Trust God and speak the gospel."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 49er Fan Pastor Tim's 1-Minute Worship Service. Created by John Christensen and available at <http://youtu.be/EbqVPt8zWQ> (as of May 7, 2014, the video has been viewed 1.1 million times)

<sup>5</sup> David Buttrick. *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Westminster John Knox, 2000), p.68.

Speaking the gospel begins with knowing who Jesus is. The well-known African American preacher, S.M. Lockridge explains powerfully who he understands Jesus to be:

<Show [That's My King Dr. S.M. Lockridge](#) Video><sup>6</sup>

It is crystal clear who Dr. Lockridge understood Jesus to be. Now, the question is what about you? . . . Who is Jesus to you?

Your experience of Jesus is critical to your ability to sow. You can only sow with the seeds you have – the seeds of your experience as a follower of the Way of Jesus.

Don't be stingy.

Don't be shy.

Don't be selective.

Sow wherever you go.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> That's My King Dr. S.M. Lockridge. Created by Albert Martin and available at <http://youtu.be/yzqTFNfeDnE> (as of May 7, 2014 the video has been viewed 3.5 million times)