

Calling all Broadcasters – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 – sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin by Kerry Enright, 13 July 2014

“A sower went out to sow.” And what a mess he made of it! He had no idea how to sow seeds properly! He sowed seed among weeds and thorns, on a path, on rocky ground. Remarkably, he also sowed seed on good soil.

The seeds went all over the place.

There was a man who had been collecting taxes for a long time. People thought he had learned how to think like a tax collector, the caution, the prudence, the calculating, the cajoling; in service of the empire, of the evil ruler, distrusted by others. He'd done it so long people only saw him as a tax collector, one to be distrusted, one to be feared, one to be avoided. Hard ground. And then, a sower sowed a seed. And the seed generated life, and a gospel was named after him. Matthew.

What kind of soil was he really?

There was another man, a rich man, who had defrauded others, calculating, deceitful, a nasty piece of work. Stay away from him! He'll rip you off! From the wrong end of town! Hard ground. And we know his name because he climbed a tree. Zaccheus. The sower sowed a seed, and went and had dinner in his home.

What kind of soil was he really?

There was a woman, and people had only ever heard her complain, because for more than a decade she suffered an illness that drained her of energy, of life, of spirit – but not of hope. She dragged herself around, when she could muster the strength, pushed away by people, always kept at the edge, never at the front, never included, over the back, and one day she managed somehow to touch the hem of Jesus clothes. The sower sowed a seed, and she was affirmed, and included and welcomed.

What kind of soil was she?

As a theological student I went once to St Andrew's Home, to take a service. And as I looked around, I thought, to myself, this is going to be hard. I wonder what I could possibly say that might engage these people. And I was a bit early, and so I got talking to one of the women waiting for the service. She was

reading a book, and I asked her about the book. It's fascinating, she said. I'm finding it really interesting. She turned over the cover for me to see. She was reading Paul Tillich's, *Shaking the Foundations*, one of the most interesting theological books of the twentieth century. And my sense of the soil changed. A sower went out to sow.

We here know about rocky places, about hard paths.

In politics, where you try your best to uphold your principles, to articulate values, to present a vision, but you also need to be elected, to be able to implement, to win supporters, to be part of a team, to compromise. The sower is there sowing seed.

In parenting, for parents and children, where you are never sure that what you are doing is the right thing, where you often wonder how this is going to turn out, where you can be both afraid and overjoyed within one conversation. The sower is there sowing seed.

In peacemaking and development. I have been following the fortunes of South Sudan. Peace talks bogged down about location of meeting, about form of mediation. Hospitals burned. Schools gutted. Whole cities destroyed. A generation of warriors. A million people displaced.

Then last night on the news, a cholera epidemic. And the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan says:

"We resolve that the church through its magnanimous approach shall take a lead to bring together the President of South Sudan and his former vice President ... to initiate and facilitate prayer, peace and reconciliation. We insist that the Church advocates for peace and justice and is committed to the propagation of peace in the entire country by encouraging the respect of life and cessation of vandalism, looting and destruction of property." The sower is sowing seed.

God throws her seed at random, it seems.

What we trust in is the generative power of the seed: its capacity to send down roots, to produce fruit, to change the soil. And God gives us God's Spirit to join us to the sower, to make us part of the sowing.

Last week, our archivist Lyndall, showed me little pieces of paper on which were written people's names: the back of an envelope, a scrap once used for another purpose. These were Dr Stuart's records of baptisms he performed. Dr Stuart was the first minister of Knox Church. As he travelled around, it seems, he would perform a baptism, and write the name of the child and the place where it occurred, on a piece of paper he would then put in his coat pocket. Then at some point, he might remember the paper in his pocket, and the pocket would be emptied. But the names, dozens of names, never went in the register. A sower went out to sow.

The Church is not a silo of seed; it's a company of sowers.

And when the seed takes root, what a difference this gospel makes!

Ben Harper is a popular US singer. New Zealand contains some of his most fervent supporters, his tracks going to number one here. Of the power of the gospel, he sings:

It will make a weak man mighty
it will make a mighty man fall
it will fill your heart and hands
or leave you with nothing at all
it's the eyes for the blind
and legs for the lame
it is love for hate
and pride for shame
that's the power of the gospel
in the hour of richness
in the hour of need
for all of creation
comes from the gospel seed
now you may leave tomorrow
and you may leave today
but you've got to have the gospel
when you start out on your way
that's the power of the gospel

When I was at Princeton, the child psychologist Robert Coles told the story of Ruby Bridges, the first black child to go to a white school in the south of USA, as a result of the decision to integrate. An incredibly inspiring story – look up Wikipedia. Look up You Tube. Coles was researching how children coped with

stress and he studied Bridges. He could not get over how courageous she was, when he thought there would be anxiety. She was six years old. When she went to the school, all other children were removed. All but one teacher walked out. Every day she was accompanied by Federal Marshalls, and she was abused from the time she got near the school, going in and going out. A woman put a black baby doll in a wooden coffin and protested with it outside the school.

Then when looking at the video of what was happening, Coles noticed Ruby's lips moving.

Ahh, thought Coles, she is finally showing stress. She is talking back. When he asked her what she was saying, she said, "I am praying for them." "You are praying for them. Why?" asked Coles. Well, said Ruby, at Church I learned we need to pray for our enemies and I could see these people were very sad and unhappy, so I pray for them. That continued for a whole year. She was the only child in the school, with one teacher all to herself. In 2011 President Obama met Ruby Bridges and, looking up at Norman Rockwell's painting of Ruby going into the school, he said something like - "I doubt I would be here now, but for what you did then." A six year old sowed a seed and the seed became more than she could ever have imagined.

A sower went out to sow, and what a mess he made of it. Some fell among weeds and thorns. Some fell on rocky ground. Some fell on the hard path. Some fell on productive soil. Thank God for the sowing. Thank God for the seed.