

Imaging the Word: *Art and Theology*

The Parable of the Sower and the Soils



Matthew 13:3-23 (ESV)

³ And Jesus told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ He who has ears, let him hear.”

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹ And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

“You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.”

¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself,

but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Familiarity does not always breed contempt, but it often breeds something potentially worse—the glazed eye. We quote favorite sayings and truisms so easily that we don’t really hear them. In reading we may even underline or highlight a passage not because it teaches us something new, but because we have read it before or because it sounds like something we have already thought. And so it is lost to our mind as soon as we turn the page.

The parables of Jesus are liable of such treatment. We have read them so often, have heard them taught or preached or have expounded on them ourselves, that their majestic brilliance is lost. Yet for Jesus’ original hearers, his parables were anything but familiar; indeed they were shocking—scandalous, even. They may have sounded at first like a story about everyday occurrences like farming or a family squabble or business dealings, but by the end his hearers were confused, astounded, and often offended.

In this series of devotions, I hope through the use of art, music and word, to bring alive some of the “punch” these stories originally had.

To get to that point, we must first consider what a “parable” is. Most of us, when we think about Jesus’ parables, think of them as a fable, a story with a “moral,” or a kind of sermon illustration. We read about the Good Samaritan or the Wheat and Tares and we immediately think of the stories as a metaphor or allegory: the “Good Samaritan” is Jesus and the Wheat and Tares is an allegory for “real” Christians and “fake” Christians. But the parables are not metaphors or allegories, where each element of the story is a stand-in for something else.

“Parable” comes the same Greek word —*parabolos*—from which we get the word *parabola*. And a parabola, you’ll remember from geometry class, is a shape made when two lines begin at the same point and come together again at the end, but up until the end, the lines are far apart, pulled away from each other. In the same way, Jesus’ parables begin at a point, often a point of contention between his critics or against the common assumptions of the people. But rather than proceed by building a sophisticated, reasoned argument, the story pulls away from the theological “point of origin,” its connection suspended, in tension like a rubber band pulled taut, until at the end it snaps back, often with a sharp pain! That is what a parable is, or rather, how it works.

We may wonder why Jesus chose to tell parables, rather than speak plainly. Jesus’ disciples wondered the same thing and ask him directly in the passage above (v10). Jesus’ response there does not entirely resolve the question: “so that his hearers won’t understand him.” Like me, you are probably scratching your head at that answer. If the point is to teach, why did Jesus choose a method of teaching that was intentionally designed to cause more confusion than understanding? Did he want to hide his message so that common people would not understand it? Was there an element of judgment involved here, a notion that his hearers didn’t deserve to understand? But then what do we make of the fact that Jesus goes on to explain the parable to the disciples?

Doesn't that mean that he wanted them to understand him after all? Or are we missing something? Is there some other dynamic at play, another point Jesus wanted to make?

The question of Why parables? comes immediately after Jesus delivers what we commonly call the Parable of the Sowers, a story of a farmer who sows wheat in various kinds of soil and the mixed success that comes of his haphazard farming practices. And the question is immediately followed by Jesus giving his disciples an explanation of the parable, telling them that the different kinds of soil are metaphors for different types of hearers of the gospel, or different kinds of responses to it. And so we conclude that the reason Jesus offers the parable is to explain why not everyone who hears the gospel embraces it—because some hearts are good soil, others are dry and rocky, others are full of weeds that choke off faith, and so on.

But I'm thinking that there's more to this than Jesus giving his hearers a "just so" explanation. What if this parable is in itself a challenge to his listeners? What if in telling the parable, He is indirectly issuing a call, challenging his hearers to inquire deeper, inviting them to not accept surface explanations, to demand more than being spoon-fed spiritual truths? That is, what if it's a kind of test. If this is the case, then by not immediately explaining the parable, Jesus is inviting his listeners to decide for themselves which kind of "soil"—or soul—they are. Are they the kind that turns away at the first sign of difficulty or the kind that will stick with it, dig deeper and reach for the sun (to continue the plant metaphor)?

In this way, the parable is "performative." In telling the parable, Jesus creates a larger parable—how his listeners respond to the parable is tantamount to their response to the gospel. To say it another way, the meaning of the parable is found in how the listeners respond to it. It's not unlike "the play within a play" in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is a "parable within a parable."

By asking Jesus the reason for the parables, the disciples prove that they are not the type who give up easily. They may be clueless at times, and they may get a lot wrong, but they are not turned away when they are confused. They want to know, to understand. They don't accept their confusion and ignorance but take initiative, asking questions and seeking the truth from Jesus. Following Jesus, and following his parables, can be difficult, but to the disciples who stick with it, Jesus promises they will "know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven."

That is the promise that Jesus makes to us, as well. That, if we stick with Him through the stories He tells, if we hold on and don't let our confusion or our shock or the offense the parables engender turn us away, we too will be transformed so that we can see the kingdom of heaven coming in our midst. Thanks be to God!

Artistic Reflection

1. SONGS:

["The Seeds of the Kingdom"](#) | Words and Music by Wendell Kimbrough

["All Things New"](#) Performed by Rivers & Robots | Music and words by Jonathan Ogden.

["The Sower's Song"](#) Performed by Andrew Peterson

2. ART:



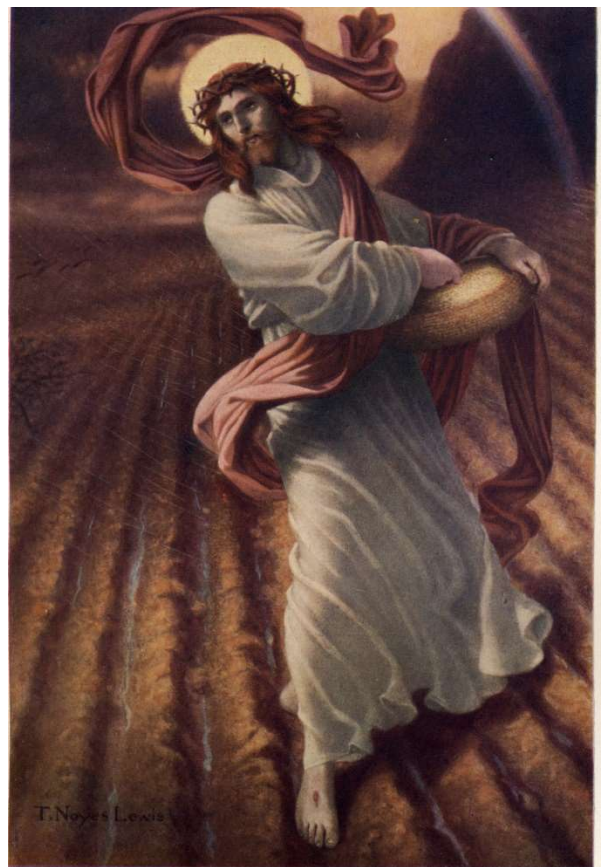
In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus tells of a farmer who sows seed in rich and poor soils in order to explain the different responses of his hearers to his message. While he does not explicitly refer to himself as the Sower, Orthodox iconography clearly depicts him as the protagonist of the story. Yet, one could also argue, following the evangelist John, that Jesus, the Word, is in fact the “seed” that is sown. In these icons, the threats to faith, to the productive fruiting of the seed are depicted symbolically: rock, birds, weeds, etc.





Charalambos Epimanondas (21st Century Cypriot), *The Sower and the Seed*

Compared with much modern Orthodox iconography, the work of Epaminonda exudes warmth and humanity, revitalizing old pattern-book imagery in exciting, innovative ways. Here Jesus, the Sower, is depicted not in the act of sowing, as above, but in the traditional icon pose, only now surrounded by a raiment of wheat sheaves. He is indeed the “Lord of the Harvest.” This icon is part of a tryptych (three-panel piece) the artist made depicting three parables from Luke: the Sower, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan.



T. Noyes Lewis (British, 1862-1946), *The Sower*, 1926
Lewis' Victoria-era painting continues the pattern of depicting Jesus as the sower, here very actively, dramatically, even heroically sowing seed



John Richardson (American), *The Sower*

In this dynamic painting Richardson depicts the sower about to cast the seed, winding back as if to throw a baseball. The broadcast seed will surely be spread out far and wide. The sower does not seem to care to be precise or controlled, but is content to cast it everywhere.



Albin Egger-Lienza (Austrian), *Sower (Der Sämann)*, 1903



James Tissot (French), *The Sower (Le semeur)*, 1886-94



Part of the power of Jesus' parables comes from the familiarity of the situations he describes in the stories—fishing, farming, cleaning, business dealings, etc. In these artistic depictions of the Parable of the Sower, these artists show farmers doing what farmers do—sow seed—a thoroughly commonplace activity. Yet it is in this common, earthly activity, Jesus conveys a surprisingly heavenly truth.

Harold Copping (1863-1932), From "The Parables of Our Lord" by Theodora Wilson



Parable of the Sower, Jesus Mafa project.

The Jesus Mafa paintings were produced in the 1970s in a collaboration between Mafa Christians in northern Cameroon and French missionaries. The paintings that resulted from this partnership were western in style, but depicted the Mafa and their environment accurately so that the Mafa could identify with the biblical stories being portrayed.



Jorge Santángelo Cocco (Argentinian), *The Sower*, 2017

Note the bird in the right corner who waits to gobble up the seed.



Scott Freeman (American), *Sower*, 2018

Freeman's related piece, *Army of God*, underscores the previous point. It's a picture of biblical, multi-ethnic, multi-generational community, planting and watering and praying. Jesus said that His kingdom is different from the kingdoms of the world in that his message comes, and his kingdom is spread, not by means of the sword but through the proclamation of his good news of restoration. Jesus said that gospel is like seed planted in the world.

In "The Sower", artist and worship leader Scott Freeman extends--and at the same time simplifies--the parable of the sower. Here Jesus, the Sower, stands with arms outstretched in a sort of crucifix gesture. The seed he sows is red, representing His blood, but also the blood of the martyrs, which has often resulted in others coming to faith. This points to how, in contrast to the crusader/conqueror paradigm, Jesus' kingdom comes not with a sword but like seed that is sown and grows. The birds then represent opposition to his message. As the artist explains: "This is the world we live in for now – goodness, redemption, and life always face spiritual opposition, even in addition to our own apathy and distractedness."



Scott Freeman (American), *Army of God*, 2018

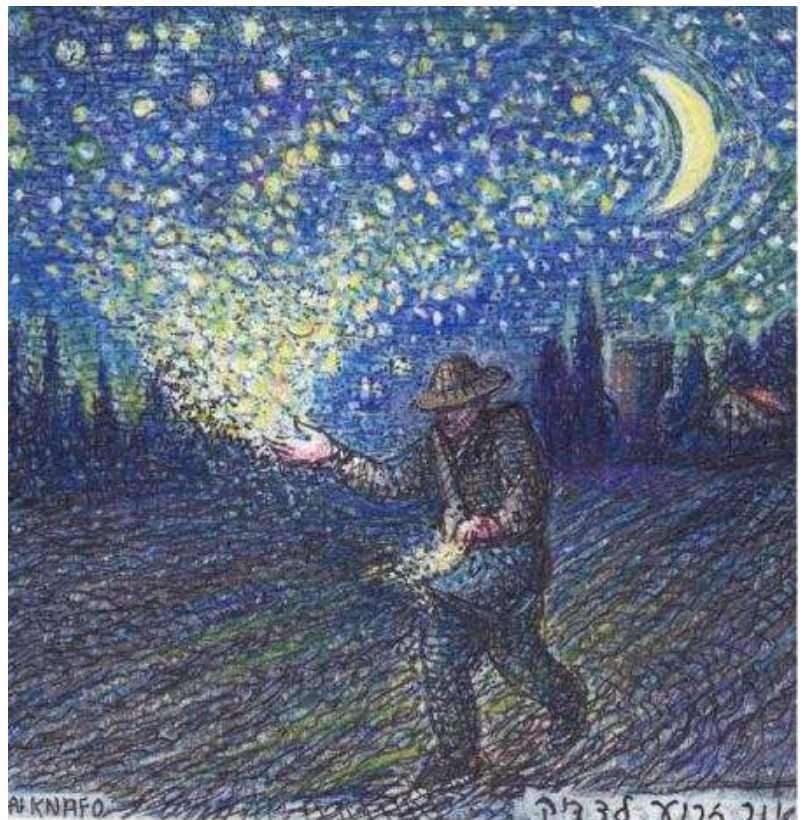


Jean-François Millet (French, 1814–1875), *The Sower*, 1850

The Sower is Millet's most famous theme and one he repeated several times between 1850 and 1870. For Millet, the subject expressed profound personal and religious beliefs. However, his first version aroused a storm of controversy when it appeared in the 1850 Paris Salon. Viewers were shocked by Millet's heroic treatment of a lowly peasant at a time when the situation of the French rural poor was degrading, and socialism threatened bourgeois society.

Millet was the artist that van Gogh most revered. Although he never saw Millet's famous *Sower*, van Gogh admired Millet's other treatments of the theme, and sought to emulate them.

Reminiscent of van Gogh's famous painting, *Starry Night*, *Starlight Sower*, by the international renowned artist Hai Knafo, was inspired by Or Zaruaa Synagogue in Jerusalem 2011 ("Light is sown for the righteous" Psalms, chapter 97 verse 11.) Though inspired by the psalm, this painting also suggests to me Jesus words in Matthew's gospel, that those who grasp his parables will be given "the secrets of heaven."



Hai Knafo (American), *Starlight Sower*, 2013

Van Gogh's Sower



Vincent van Gogh (French), *Sower with Setting Sun*, 1888

Not many know that as a young man, Vincent van Gogh developed a passionate interest in Christian theology. Before he became an artist in his own right, he was apprenticed to a firm of Parisian art dealers, who helped him both to appreciate art and also to know the inner workings of the art business. After working in the company's Paris and London offices, he took a teaching position at a boys' school in Ramsgate. By the summer of 1876, he realized that he was deeply attracted to the Christian faith and began to think about ordination. At that point he was teaching at a school in Isleworth, run by a Congregationalist minister, and began exercising a modest pastoral ministry.

On Sunday, October 26, 1876, van Gogh preached his first sermon. By all accounts, it was a lackluster event. His delivery lacked the passion that he clearly felt for his subject but was unable to put into words. Yet in the end it would not be words, but images, that proved to be van Gogh's fundamental belief that art illuminates and inspires faith. Towards the end of his sermon, he spoke of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. Rather than develop the intellectual aspects of the concept of such a pilgrimage, he turned to art to make his point:

I once saw a very beautiful picture: it was a landscape at evening. In the distance on the right-hand side a row of hills appeared blue in the evening mist. Above those hills the splendor or the sunset, the gray clouds with their linings of silver and gold and purple. The landscape is a plain

or heath covered with grass and its yellow eaves, for it was autumn. Through the landscape a road leads to a high mountain far, far away. On the top of that mountain is a city wherein the setting sun casts a glory. On the road walks a pilgrim, staff in hand.

Van Gogh went on to make some thoroughly appropriate points about the nature of the Christian life. Yet what was significant here was the way in which van Gogh appealed to the imagination, creating a word-picture that allows his audience to bring new depth to the traditional image of the believer as a pilgrim, trying to progress through the wilderness of this world.

Nothing much came of van Gogh's pastoral aspirations. He pursued theological studies in Amsterdam in 1877 unsuccessfully before moving on to the bleak Borinage region of Belgium to begin a ministry to its coalminers. By the end of 1879 he had become convinced that he was a failure in his chosen area of service and decided to become a professional artist instead. By 1886 he was in Paris with Gauguin and by 1888 he moved to the south of France. Some of his greatest works date from this period, including his *Path through a Field with Willows*. The beauty of the Provençal countryside proved a fruitful inspiration, as did the activities associated with it, such as sowing seeds.

At least four of van Gogh's paintings from this period bear the title "the Sower." The most beautiful of these was painted in November 1888, generally known as *Sower with Setting Sun*. The sower's features are in shadow as he strides away from the setting sun. The late autumn landscape is already showing signs of the approaching winter. Yet the very act of sowing seed is itself a promise of the spring that is to come. Furthermore, the bright yellow sun looks like a halo, turning the sower into a saint.

I am reminded here of *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence (1611-91). In this book Lawrence tells of an insight he gained at the age of sixteen, which remained with him throughout his life. He was contemplating a tree in the depths of winter, stripped bare of its leaves. Yet he knew that, with the coming of spring, "the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear." It was not something he need worry about. He could trust that renewal would come in its own good time. In the same way, he writes, we should have a settled trust in God, which can sustain us in times of spiritual dryness. As Lawrence puts it, we should use both our minds and imaginations to "establish ourselves in the presence of God." Is this promise also hinted at by van Gogh? He certainly knew enough about the Gospels to appreciate the importance of the point.

Van Gogh's depiction of the Sower can also serve to enlarge and stimulate our imaginations as we reflect on the Parable of the Sower. It is easy to imagine the scene as Jesus tells with van Gogh's 1888 work as our guide. Picture the sower, walking up and down the fields, sowing the seed. See in your mind the seed falling on the ground—on the hard, dry path alongside the field; on shallow soil; into the midst of a patch of thorns; and finally on good, deep soil. The main point that the parable makes so well is that it is the same seed that is sown in every case. The outcome depends upon the ground into which it falls. The parable tells that there is nothing wrong with the gospel message. Its impact on people depends on whether they provide the right soil in which it may grow. And when the gospel truly takes root, it grows and bears fruit.

The Parable of the Sower thus provides us with a framework for making sense of how the preaching of the same gospel impacts people in such different ways. It also offers us a way of critiquing ourselves by inviting us to ask hard questions. For example, what sort of soil are we providing for the gospel seed? Is it like a patch of ground in which other well-established plants or, worse, weeds are already growing, so that the new seed will be choked? Part of the ongoing work of Christian discipleship is to review our priorities and commitments, to see if we have allowed something else to displace God from his proper place. Such weeds are called in the Bible “idols.”



The Reformer Martin Luther offered a helpful way of checking whether we have allowed this to happen. “Whatever your heart depends upon, and wherever your heart is fixed—that is actually your god.” In other words, asking ourselves what we *really* trust in and where does our security and affection *really* lie is a highly effective tool for self-examination. And if there are thorns growing in the soil of our lives—to revert to the imagery of the parable—we will need to uproot them to make way for the new seed of the gospel.

Another of van Gogh’s paintings of the sower, also from 1888. As with the previous example, the sowing is undertaken even as the sun sets and the wheat in the field behind is ready for harvest, suggesting autumn. Is this an action done in hope or foolishness?

Lord, help our seed of faith to grow. May we provide good soil in which it may grow, slowly yet surely. And may we bear fruit, that others may know of the joy and peace of your kingdom. Amen.