

The Most Influential Person Who Never Lived

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 | 7/13/2014

The most significant person who ever lived. Numero Uno. In all of human history. Who is it?

When *TIME* magazine tackled this question, they used a computer to aggregate "millions of traces of opinions," the way Google ranks web pages. The top results were not terribly surprising: 1. Jesus. 2. Napoleon. 3. Muhammad. 4. William Shakespeare. 5. Abraham Lincoln. Going down the list, things got a bit more controversial. For example, Ronald Reagan (32) beat out Paul the Apostle (34). And they both crushed Saint Peter (65). Presbyterians will note that John Calvin is number 99 out of 100. Martin Luther came in at 17.

All of these folks are real people, of course. But who would be among the 100 most influential people who *never* lived? People who never took a breath except in the pages of fiction?

TIME produced a book about these folks as well. Some of them are better known to us than actual historical figures: Sherlock Holmes, Wonder Woman, Ebenezer Scrooge, Betty Crocker, Don Quixote, Rosie the Riveter, Captain Ahab, Mary Poppins, Indiana Jones, Romeo and Juliet. All influential. All very significant. But none of them had a life. Only a fictional life because someone created them.

You know their impact: Without such figures, we couldn't speak of a man having an Oedipus Complex or the Peter Pan Syndrome. We couldn't describe women as Cinderella or Madame Bovary. We couldn't say we were afraid of government being Big Brother or science producing Dr. Frankenstein's Monster. Our lives are much richer because of these people *who never lived*.

The Bible contains quite a few of these characters as well. The Sower is a fictional character created by Jesus, one of the most significant figures from his wide-ranging collection of parables. And, unlike a cultural character such as the Marlboro Man, the Sower has spiritual depth. No one else comes close, except for perhaps the Good Samaritan and the father of the "prodigal son" -- people who are included, not surprisingly, in *TIME's* top 100.

Jesus faces such a large crowd of admirers by the Sea of Galilee that he has to teach from a boat, while the people stand on the beach. Matthew reports to us that he tells them "many things in parables". Such stories do more than communicate information -- they engage people, sometimes delight and move them and always force them to dig beneath the surface to understand what is being said.

"Listen!" says Jesus. "A sower went out to sow". And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up". Notice that the Sower is just tossing seed, not digging holes and then covering the seeds with dirt. When some seeds hit the path and are gobbled up by birds, he just keeps sowing.

"Other seeds fell on rocky ground," says Jesus, "where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away". Not surprisingly, these seeds scorch and die.

But the Sower keeps moving along, and Jesus says that "other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Finally, a few of the seeds hit good soil and *voila* -- they bring forth grain in enormous quantities!

What strikes you immediately about the character of the Sower? He seems a bit careless, doesn't he? "The farmer in our story is not overly cautious," says professor of New Testament theology Donald H. Juel. "He throws seed everywhere, apparently confident there will be a harvest in spite of the losses." He simply keeps sowing his seed, believing that growth will come.

So what does the Sower tell you about Jesus? This influential person who never lived has something to teach us about the most influential person who *ever* lived. Jesus "is not cautious about where he preaches and on whom he invests his time," insists Juel. Jesus simply keeps sowing the word of the kingdom of God, even though it lands on religious people who wonder if he is possessed, on disciples who struggle to understand him and on at least one young rich man who cannot part with his possessions in order to follow Jesus. The Sower keeps sowing and Jesus keeps spreading the word.

Jesus is nothing like the farmer in *this* parable. A farmer, ragged and barefoot, was standing on the steps of his run-down shack. A stranger stopped for a drink of water and he asked: "How is your cotton coming along?"

Farmer: "Ain't got any."

Stranger: "Did you plant any?"

Farmer: "Nope, afraid of boll weevils."

Stranger: "Well, how is your corn?"

Farmer: "Didn't plant any, afraid there would be no rain."

Stranger: "Well, how are your potatoes?"

Farmer: "Ain't got any, scared of the potato bugs."

Stranger: "Really, what *did* you plant?"

Farmer: "Nothing, I just played it safe."

So you got to ask: "How safe is it to not have any crops at all?"

The Parable of the Sower teaches us that Jesus throws good seed everywhere, knowing that much of it is going to waste. And as followers of Jesus, we should be doing ministry and mission in the very same way. Perhaps "the same careless abandon should characterize the church's ministry," suggests Donald Juel; "speaking gracious words without carefully calculating the potential for success." This means welcoming others as Jesus has welcomed us, and preaching a message of unconditional love and unlimited grace. After all, Jesus calls us to be faithful to him and to the kingdom of God, not to be successful in a worldly sense.

But there's more to this parable. When Jesus explains the meaning of the story to his disciples, the focus suddenly shifts from the Sower to the Soil. In fact, you could even call it "The Parable of the Four Kinds of Soil."

When the emphasis is on the Soil, the message is that we should all be good soil -- people who hear the word of the kingdom of God and understand it. When you hear the word of the kingdom, don't be like the *path* which is susceptible to the evil one who "comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart" (v. 19). Don't be the *rocky ground* in which a plant "has no root, but endures only for a while" (v. 21). Don't be *thorny* soil, in which "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing" (v. 22). And don't be like the "fearful farmer" who never sowed any seed at all. His harvest was nothing at all.

So what is it that Jesus commands us to do? In a word: "Listen!" (v. 3). That's what Jesus says at the beginning of the parable, and it's certainly something that we can do as active -- rather than passive -- disciples. Listen to the story of the Sower, and learn that Jesus is incredibly generous in the way that he shares the word of the kingdom with all the people of the world. Listen and learn that God's Word is incredibly fruitful, and that a great harvest is guaranteed. Listen and learn that the coming of the kingdom of God isn't something that we can control. Instead, says, Donald Juel, "everything depends on what God will do."

The Sower reveals to us that Jesus is in charge, spreading the word of the kingdom. Our job is to trust what he is doing, and share his message with joy and generosity. If we do, we'll be feeling the influence of a person who never lived, the Sower. We'll also be following a Savior who really lived and died, and then rose to be with us forever.

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