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# Seeds of Mission

by David Rensberger

Isaiah 55:10–13; Romans 8:1–11; Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

In her memoir *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*, Rhoda Janzen writes of her childhood terror of being called to mission on the Chaco, an arid basin in South America that was becoming a Mennonite mission field at the time.<sup>1</sup> I had something of a similar experience as a Mennonite boy in rural Indiana in the 1950s. I wasn't exactly terrified, just convinced somehow that, because I couldn't imagine my shy self doing the great work that God had missionaries doing in Africa and Latin America, I was failing my Maker, failing to be the best a Christian could be.

I've long since recognized that I have other gifts from God, other callings equally as valid as foreign mission. Yet that feeling of discomfort around mission has been hard to shake, especially when combined with more abstract ideas about pluralism and proselytizing and cultural imperialism. But my years of teaching and researching the New Testament eventually showed me that mission has been essential to Christianity from its earliest days, beginning with Jesus himself. Whatever my feelings of discomfort, mission is something I need to explore. What must Christians do in order to carry out mission in ways that are consistent with the missions of Jesus and his apostles? And, in fact, is there something even prior to the doing of mission, some necessary prerequisite for the carrying out of authentic mission? I'm going to respond to these questions by starting somewhere fairly obvious, but my reason for starting where I do may prove to be less obvious.

“A sower went out to sow.”<sup>2</sup> The simple beginning of this parable in Matthew 13 reminds us of the relative simplicity of crop planting in the agriculture of Jesus's time and place. A sower would walk over an unplowed field scattering seed, and the seed would later be plowed into the earth. It's not surprising that birds and rocks and thorns would threaten such vulnerable seeds. To the unin-

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1. Rhoda Janzen, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress: A Memoir of Going Home* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009), 49.

2. Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*. The parable is also found in Mark 4 and Luke 8.

formed listener, an urbanite from Sepphoris or Tiberias, the whole operation might have appeared to be a waste of time and seed. And that seems essential to the main point Jesus was making—a point that his rural hearers would have recognized.

The parable of the sower is meant to justify Jesus's mission. For someone who wanted to be a prophet and a reformer (let alone a messiah), Jesus seemed to be wasting a lot of time—wandering around the country with his ragged band of followers; associating with people known to be impure, morally and otherwise; having no visible means of support other than donations from wealthy women detached from their homes and families (Lk 8:1–3). Was *this* the Reign of God? Well, yes, Jesus says with this parable. He may seem to be throwing the seed of the Kingdom around hither and yon, without much purpose or plan. But, he says, his mission will produce a harvest, and it will be astonishing. Considering that the usual yield for farmers of that era was tenfold—ten units harvested for every unit planted—even thirtyfold would be a miracle, and a hundredfold would beggar belief. And that's the point: as wildly aimless, even counterproductive, as Jesus's mission seemed to be, he counted on a harvest so grand it could only come from divine intervention. Jesus believed in divine intervention. Expected it. He had every confidence that God would bring forth a massive harvest from the seeming randomness of his mission.

At the end of the parable, Jesus simply says, "Let anyone with ears listen!"; but later we get the familiar interpretation, in which the seed is identified as "the word" and the various environments it falls into are assigned allegorical interpretations. Biblical scholars widely regard this interpretation as an add-on from some years after Jesus, a way of understanding the parable in the context of the *church's* mission. Why do conversions sometimes fail to last? In the interpretation, failure to persevere in the Christian way results from persecution or from worldly cares and materialism. These terms have strong resonances in Anabaptist history, where believers have tended to define themselves in terms of endurance under persecution and avoidance of worldliness. The parable encourages trust in God for growth in mission despite unpromising conditions, and the interpretation speaks to possibilities of both success and failure once the mission has taken place. Both the parable and its interpretation concern not just individual spiritual life and growth (as we are often tempted to read them) but God's mission overall.

The imagery of seeds and planting was a favorite with Jesus. All of his seed parables speak of growth and coming to fruition, whether it is the seed that grows and ripens by an unknown process, or the good seed contaminated with weeds, or the mustard seed that produces growth out of all proportion to its size (Mt 13:24–32; Mk 4:26–31). The church has not been wrong to apply these parables to its mission and growth (though there are more and less authentic ways of doing so), since they embody Jesus's understanding of his own mission. He

brought a message from God and gathered a community that put that message into practice. His parables interpret and defend this mission—both its setting among unexpected people and its unexpected results of repentance, forgiveness, mercy, and love. Jesus’s mission is the context in which his parables first made sense. That is why they can provide guidance for our mission too.

What interests me most about these parables, though, is something they leave unspoken: a seed can only produce what it is itself. Wheat seeds make wheat, and weed seeds make weeds (Mt 13:24–30). The parable of the sower doesn’t specify what kind of grain is sown, but whether falling onto rocky or thorny or productive soil, the seeds will become only the particular type of grain that they are.

If the seed is a symbol of the mission that Jesus was “sowing,” then what is planted and grows up is his way of trust, love, gentleness, and mercy.<sup>3</sup> If we extend this unspoken assumption in applying the parable to mission in our time, then *our mission too can only reproduce what we are ourselves*. Only communities that embody God’s trusting, loving, gentle, and merciful reign, both in intention and in practice, can give birth to new communities that reflect that reign. We can’t share the good news if we don’t look and act like good news ourselves. In other words, the foundational, first-and-foremost work of the church’s mission is *being* the church.

In 2011, the leadership of Mennonite Church USA drafted a *Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan*, which was updated in 2014 after feedback from the 2013 delegate assembly.<sup>4</sup> The plan affirms that the church is to be not only a sign and a witness but also an instrument, a promise, and a foretaste of the Reign of God.<sup>5</sup> This Reign, made visible in Jesus, is understood as embodying the loving purposes of God, and the believing community is understood as being “formed *by* and *for* the Kingdom.”<sup>6</sup> This idea of being formed *by* the Kingdom or the Reign of God is much truer to the teaching of Jesus, I think, than the classic twentieth-century liberal ideal of “building the Kingdom.” We do not build the Reign of God; God’s Reign builds us. But it does build us, and the church exists as a new kind of humanity, committed as our “first and highest priority,” in the words of the *Missional Vision*, “to fashion and mold our lives after that of Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

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3. See Matthew 5:5, 7, 43–48; 7:12; 8:13; 9:10–13, 28–29; 11:29; 16:12–15; 17:20; 18:1–4, 21–35; 21:21–22; 22:34–40; 23:23.

4. *A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan for Mennonite Church USA*, February 25, 2014, 7–20, <http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/our-purposeful-plan/>.

5. *A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan*, 88–89, 106–8, 150–52, 165–66, 174–75.

6. *A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan*, 81–89; emphasis in original.

7. *A Missional Vision and Purposeful Plan*, 155–56.

We are to be the human race that God has desired from the first, remade in the image of God by taking on the image of Jesus, the One who is God's image from all eternity (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). Only when the church is this sign and foretaste of God's Reign, shaped in the pattern of Jesus, can the work of reproducing its way of existence begin. Mission begins in *being* (which means *acting as*) the alternative community converted to the vision of God's purposes that Jesus embodied, expressed in his teaching, life, death, and resurrection and passed on to his disciples.

This tells us something about the relationship between discipleship and mission. Sometimes these are portrayed as alternatives; more often, discipleship is seen as the consequence of mission. But discipleship is also the *prerequisite* for mission. In the Great Commission, the disciples, who have been taught and formed by Jesus as they accompanied him, are commanded by the risen Lord to "go . . . and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Only those who have become disciples can make new disciples, and then those disciples go on to make other disciples. That is the pattern of New Testament mission.

God intends to create a new humanity, reconciled and living with one another and with all creation in peace and in love; and if God intends it, then it will happen. "My word . . . shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose" (Is 55:11). As rain and snow enable the sower's seed to sprout and bear fruit (v. 10), so God *will* bring forth this new people. But how can we live in that ultimate future now? The world is still marked by sin, we are still marked by sin, and five minutes with the current news makes the prospect of a renewed human race seem impossibly remote. Can ordinary human beings really be a foretaste of the Reign of God, really embody God's own purposes, God's new creation, here and now?

The Yes to this question is one of the great themes of Paul's letters (at least as Anabaptists read them). In Romans 8, for instance, he says: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death": the goal of Christ's incarnation was "that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (vv. 2, 4). God enables us to do what our unaided powers could never accomplish. Already, now we can turn aside from "the flesh" (the standard, self-centered way of life in which our wants rank above everyone else's needs) so that God's will can be carried out, even in us. The new creation, our ultimate restoration to God's original design for us as creatures in the image of God, is already happening among those who are "in Christ": "everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:16–17). We are being transformed by Jesus and the Holy Spirit, away from conformity to societies alienated from God's designs, toward God's will of love (Rom 12:2, 9–21; 13:8–10). Paul's mission was to expand this new human creation far and wide. By first *being* the new humanity—opening themselves to "God who is at work in [them], enabling [them] both to will and

to work” for what God desires—his transformed communities could then continue the mission of reproducing themselves, even in Paul’s absence (Phil 2:13).

A missional church must *be* the church, be this transformed and transforming community of human beings who boldly claim to live according to the Spirit and not the flesh. This means that every disciple is part of the mission, whether they are called “into the field” or not. There is a rhythm, or cycle, of being and doing, discipleship and mission. Being is first: we can only reproduce what we are. We must examine our own reality in the light of Jesus’s teaching and example, making sure that we are indeed God’s new humanity in Christ—before we offer our spiritual condition to others.

We don’t have to be perfect; the apostles certainly weren’t. But we need to open ourselves to transformation away from conformity to our own societies’ fleshly mindsets before we can invite others to nonconformity in their contexts. Those who have set themselves to become and to be God’s new kind of people, open to God’s transforming Spirit, are in a position to do the work of mission—and do it they must, guided by that same Spirit. The new communities raised up through them by the Spirit, becoming the new people themselves, continue the cycle in their own missions.

The mission of doing, of speaking and helping and sharing, begins in a mission of being. A reconciled, loving, caring, forgiving, peace-making, justice-doing church is the seed of a new humanity, the beginning of a brand-new garden. With God as our gardener, the living Christ our soil, and God’s Spirit our rain, breeze, and sun, we are the seeds of mission.