

# Reflections on a Prayer Vigil

by John Andrew Gallery

On Sunday, January 16, 2000, as we maintained our weekly afternoon peace vigil on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, I reflected on a lesson I had prepared to teach in First-day school that morning. As is often the case, the events of the afternoon provided an interesting example about the lesson.

The First-day school is studying the parables of Jesus, and I had reflected on the parable of the sower whose seed falls on rock, in weeds, and on fertile ground. This parable is usually interpreted in terms of the seed as a symbol for the Word of God. After all, this is how the Gospel says Jesus himself explained it. That might be true, and there are useful ideas that can be learned from looking at the parable that way. But for me this parable, like others, illustrates the characteristics of a man (and most of them are about men) who is already living in the Kingdom of God, even as he goes about his daily life. This is a means of showing us how we too should live if we want to live in the Kingdom of God.

This parable is strangely simple. The man goes out to the field, he throws his grain, some falls on rock, some may grow up among weeds, some will fall on fertile ground and bring forth a good harvest. To Jesus' listeners this must have seemed a strange story—after all, it is exactly what any one of them would have done in planting a field, a perfectly ordinary act and way of sowing in those times. How does this seemingly ordinary story tell us anything about living in the Kingdom of God?

I find it useful to look at the parables in contrast to the way I might do something similar. I have often planted a vegetable garden. When I do, I first create some rows in the soil and then carefully sprinkle my seeds down the row, trying to make sure there is adequate space between each seed. I cover them over and water them. I am trying to make sure that each and every seed I plant grows. Of course I

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know that this will not be the case, and that even if they all did grow, they would be too close together, and I would have to weed out some. But my planting actions are very much based on a desire on my part to control the results of my actions—to ensure that every seed grows.

The sower in the parable takes a very different approach. He *knows* that every seed cannot grow—some will fall on rocks, some will have to be weeded out, some may not get enough water or sun. He knows that if he tried to control what happens to every seed, it would be pointless, and what's more, it would take him forever to plant his fields.

So he acts quite differently than I do in two important ways. First, he doesn't try to control the outcome of his actions; he isn't overly concerned with the results. He knows that if he throws enough seeds in generally the right direction, enough will fall on fertile ground to create a good harvest. Second, he trusts God. He trusts God that enough will fall on fertile ground, and that the rain and sun will come. Those two things—not being overly concerned with results and trusting God—are the difference between him and me, the difference between someone who is living in the Kingdom of God and someone who is still trying to.

Not being concerned with results is hard for me. Sometimes I am hesitant to do something unless I am fairly certain that I will succeed. In many cases, not being certain, I don't try. When I do try, I often want the results to be what I want. I'm not always prepared to trust the process, to trust God even, that a result different from what I think is best is, in fact, best. (That is the great strength of Quaker meeting for business as a learning process—learning to trust God that the result that emerges will be the right one for that moment.)

This parable helped me understand more clearly what I am doing by participating in the peace vigils. I started last April because I felt a need to take an action that expressed my concern about the NATO bombings. What was the right action?—I use that term in its Buddhist sense. The right action was to be a visible reminder that peace is the essential goal. The sower takes right action—to feed his family and village he must plant his field, and to be successful he must throw his seed at least in the right direction. So the first act is deciding on right action. For Quakers this is sometimes characterized as a leading, but that sounds overly serious to me. The second action is taking action. It's not enough to know what's right to do, you actually have to

do it. The sower sows his grain; I and others stand in the cold holding signs. What results do I expect from my actions? Did I expect NATO to stop bombing in the Balkans because of what I was doing? No. Did I expect President Clinton or Congress to change their views? No. I had no idea what the results might be; I didn't care. I was simply trusting God that some good might come of this.

Each week some collection of people react to us. Some stop and talk, some honk horns and give us a thumbs up. This past Sunday a group of Asian tourists stopped and looked at us, talking in their own language with one another. By motions they asked if they could take our picture. We have become used to that. But these people wanted to be in it. One woman came forward and stood beside me and had her picture taken; a man came and stood next to Marcelle Martin and had his; two people picked up one of our signs and stood in front of us and had their picture taken. As they were doing this, I thought about what would happen when they got home, thousands of miles away. They would take out these pictures and show them to their friends—“Oh look, remember those Quakers in Philadelphia standing in the cold for peace?” (We gave them some Quaker literature.) What will their friends think? Who's to know that the pictures won't encourage one or more of them to make a more serious commitment to peace in their own lives?

By standing on the mall, I throw my seeds. I am not concerned with the results. I trust that God will find some fertile ground for them to fall on, and that each seed that grows—each person who goes away reminded that peace is our goal—will eventually produce an incredible harvest. □



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