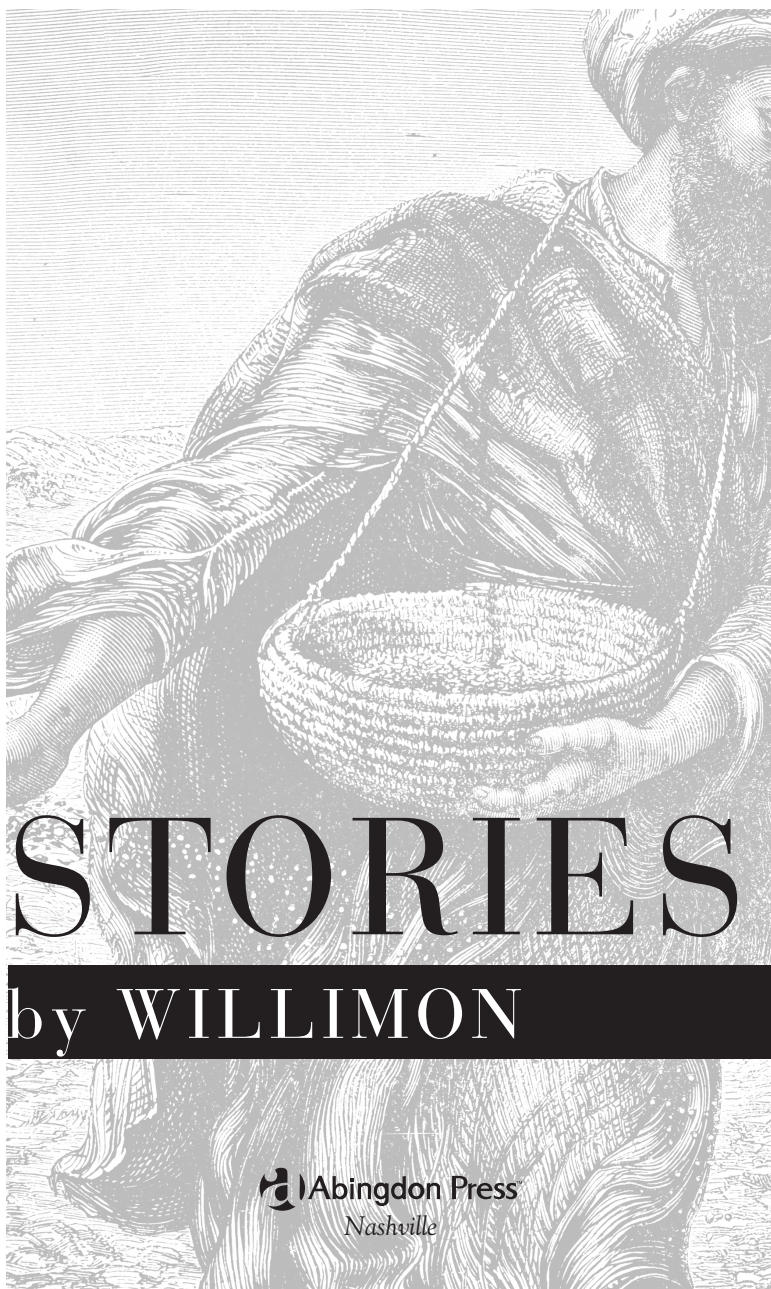


STORIES

by WILLIMON



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The Sower

[Jesus] said many things to [the crowds] in parables:

“A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn’t deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention.”

Jesus’s disciples came and said to him, “Why do you use parables when you speak to the crowds?”

Jesus replied, “Because they haven’t received the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but you have. For those who have will receive more and they will have more than enough. But as for those who don’t have, even the little they have will be taken away from them. This is why I speak to the crowds in parables: although they see, they don’t really see; and although they hear, they don’t really hear or understand. What Isaiah prophesied has become completely true for them:

You will hear, to be sure, but never understand;
and you will certainly see but never recognize what
you are seeing.

For this people’s senses have become calloused,

and they've become hard of hearing,
and they've shut their eyes
so that they won't see with their eyes
or hear with their ears
or understand with their minds,
and change their hearts and lives that I may heal them.

“Happy are your eyes because they see. Happy are your ears because they hear. I assure you that many prophets and righteous people wanted to see what you see and hear what you hear, but they didn’t.”

Matthew 13:3-17

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1 Good Sowers

On Sunday morning, after I'm done preaching at Duke Chapel and have retired to my appointed perch—the seat behind the second sopranos, where I blend into the woodwork—I often look up at the stained-glass window high above and across from me that depicts Moses. Only the second sopranos and I can see it. The window shows scenes from Moses's life: the child raised by royalty, the angry defender of the oppressed, the liberator, the lawgiver, the leader of Israel to the promised land.

But often—at about 11:45 a.m.—the sun highlights one scene more than the rest. It's the last event in Moses's ministry, when God prevents him from entering Canaan. Yahweh lets Moses get to the door but does not allow him to cross the threshold with Israel. Whether the artist who created these windows intended to force the preacher to ponder that scene week in, week out, I do not know. But I have memorized it in detail. As I look at the end of Moses's ministry, I am reminded of my own ministry.

A lot goes unfinished. Much of pastoral life is spent on the verge, at the door. Preaching takes the congregation to the threshold, but what lasting good does it do?

As I recently worked on a book on ministerial burnout, on why pastors call it quits, I was impressed that preaching, a central pastoral activity, is a major source of pastoral disillusionment. It's such a fragile art. Much of the time it takes to prepare a sermon is invisible—and so are the results. No one can demonstrate empirically verified outcomes of “good” preaching. And that's a problem in a world that worships results.

For me and for the sopranos, we must, like Moses, be content with planting while leaving the harvest for others. They sing, I preach, and

God only knows where it all leads, what land of promise will be opened through our ministry.

A man I know who works with teachers says the ones who are best able to keep at it over the years are those “who are good sowers rather than good reapers.” Teachers and preachers must find meaning enough in the act of planting the seed and not have need to be there for the harvest.

If we preachers or choir members or Sunday school teachers are going to persevere at Christian ministry, we will do so only by having confidence that God really does convey treasure through us earthen vessels. God puts us to good purposes. Even though we may not understand God’s plans, even though we may not enter the promised land of concrete results and visible fulfillment, we can boldly announce the message of the ultimate triumph of God’s good purposes to those in exodus, going from here to there.

The Christian Ministry,
March–April 1989

2 Which One of You?

A farmer goes forth to sow, carefully, meticulously preparing the ground, removing rocks and weeds, sowing one seed six inches from another...

No! This farmer goes out and begins slinging seed.

A dragnet full of sea creatures is hauled into the boat. Sort the catch, separating the good from the bad? No. The Master is more impressed by

the size of the haul than by the quality of the catch. One day, not today, it shall be sorted.

A field is planted with good seed. But when the seed germinates, the field is full of weeds growing alongside the wheat.

“An enemy has done this!” cries the farmer. Enemy, my foot. You get an agricultural mess when your idea of sowing is to so carelessly sling seed.

Should we cull the wheat from the weeds? “No, good plants or bad, I just love to see things grow,” says the casual farmer.

Someday the Master will judge good from bad, weeds from wheat, sort out the righteous from the unrighteous, but not today.

So, here’s a farmer and a fisherman who are more into heedless sowing, miraculous growing, and reckless harvesting than in taxonomy of the good and the bad, the worthwhile from the worthless, the saved from the damned.

Which one of you, having lost one sheep will not abandon the ninety-nine sheep (who lack the creativity to roam), leaving them to fend for themselves in the wilderness, and beat the bushes until you find the one lost sheep? Which one of you will not put that sheep on your shoulders like a child and say to your friends, “Come party with me. I found my sheep!”?

To which your friends would say, “Congratulations. You just lost most of your flock who wandered away while you were fixated on finding the one who wandered.”

Which one of you would not do that?

Which of you women, if you lose a quarter, will not rip up the carpet and strip the house bare of heavy appliances, and when you have found your lost coin, run into the street and call to your neighbors, “Come party with me. I found my quarter!”?

Which one of you would not do that?

And which of you fathers, having two sons, the younger of whom leaves home, blows all your hard earned money on booze and bad

women, then comes dragging back home in rags, will not throw the biggest bash this town has ever seen, shouting, “This son of mine was dead but is now alive!”?

Which one of you dads would not do that?

And which of you, journeying down the Jericho Road, upon seeing a perfect stranger lying in the ditch half dead, bleeding, would not risk your life, put the injured man on the leather seats of your Jaguar, take him to the hospital, max out your credit cards paying for his recovery, and more?

Which of you travelers would not do that?

None of us would behave so unseemly, recklessly, and extravagantly.

These are not stories about us. *They are stories about God.*

Who Will Be Saved?,
Abingdon Press, 2008

3

Don't Take It Back

He owned a hardware store, and he was a member of my church. Someone had warned me about him when I moved there. “He’s usually quiet,” they said, “but be careful.” People still recalled the Sunday in 1970 when, in the middle of the sermon (the previous preacher’s weekly diatribe against Nixon and the Vietnam War), he had stood up from where he was sitting, shook his head, and walked right out. So, I always preached with one eye on my notes and the other on him. He hadn’t walked out on a sermon in more than ten years. Still, a preacher can never be too safe.

You can imagine my fear when one Sunday, having waited until everyone had shaken my hand and left the narthex, he approached me, gritting his teeth and muttering, “I just don’t see things your way, preacher.”

I moved into my best mode of non-defensive defensiveness, assuring him that my sermon was just one way of looking at things, and that perhaps he had misinterpreted what I said, and even if he had not, I could very well be wrong and er, uh...

“Don’t you back off with me,” he snapped. “I just said that your sermon shook me up. I didn’t ask you to take it back. Stick by your guns—if you’re a real preacher.”

Then he said to me, with an almost desperate tone, “Preacher, I run a hardware store. Since you’ve never had a real job, let me explain it to you. Now, you can learn to run a hardware store in about six months. I’ve been there *fifteen years*. That means that all week, nobody talks to me like I know anything. I’m not like you, don’t get to sit around and read books and talk about important things. It’s just me and that hardware store. Sunday morning and your sermons are all I’ve got. Please, don’t you dare take it back.”

“The Unfettered Word,” sermon, Duke
University Chapel, October 15, 1989

4 — Told You Sow

We had predicted it. At age fourteen she was on the rear end of a Honda, screaming up and down the street as if it were Daytona. “She will end up bad,” we said. At fifteen I could tell, by the empty beer cans

in my front yard the next day, what kind of weekend she had wasted. “They’re just going to have to take her in hand,” I said. “She’s headed for trouble.”

More than once, on those Saturday nights, her car radio electrified my sleep, sending me hurtling through space at 3 a.m. “People like that are a menace to society,” we declared. Then at sixteen, there was a story in the papers, the trial, and she was sent away for a year at the Youth Correctional Institution. “We told you so,” we said. “Only a matter of time,” we agreed. While there, she gave birth to the child she was carrying.

The day of reckoning came. I was cutting my hedge at the time. I could see them, though. Cars began gathering about ten or eleven that morning. Loud music coming from the house. People came and went, bringing baskets of food, dishes, stacks of plates. Chairs were put out on the lawn. The music grew louder. Finally, a car pulled up. People came pouring out of the house and huddled around the car. Everybody oohing and aahing. I was hacking at the hedge, cutting it down to the roots by this time. Some kind of little basket, decorated with pink ribbons, was unloaded. Everyone paraded behind it into the house. I watched them from my now-sparse hedge. Before going in, my neighbor had the nerve to stand on the porch and yell, “Hey, she’s home, and the baby too. Come on over and join us. We’re having a party!”

Who? Me? Humph! I’m a Christian!

“Are you resentful because I’m generous?” (Matt 20:15)

“Graciousness and Grumbling,”
sermon, Northside United Methodist Church,
September 20, 1981