

A Faint Tracing: Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

July 16, 2023

The Rev. Eyleen Farmer

Annie Dillard is in her late 70's now, but she was only 29 when she won the Pulitzer Prize for her nonfiction narrative, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. I don't remember when I first discovered this book, but I was so enchanted I've read it, at least parts of it, several times over the decades since its publication in 1974. On her official website Dillard lists her religion as "none," but she doesn't seem to be capable of thinking about or writing about anything *but* God. It's just that her God is so much bigger and, frankly, so much stranger than anything that can be captured in even the most elegant creed.

*Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery*, she writes in Chapter One. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is her exploration of that mystery in the context of her tiny corner of the world alongside an unremarkable creek near Roanoke, VA.

One of my favorite passages is a story she tells about herself as a child growing up in Pittsburgh. She would take a penny—of some value to a six year old in the fifties—and hide it in the crook of a tree or a crack in the sidewalk. She would then draw with chalk on the sidewalk huge arrows pointing to the treasure. When she learned to write, she added prompts: *MONEY THIS WAY* or *SURPRISE AHEAD*. “*I was greatly excited during all this arrow-drawing,*” she wrote, “*at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe.*” She didn't stay to see who found her penny; she simply planted it and went on her way, not giving it another thought until the next time she was moved to plant a penny.

Since the day I read this story for the first time, I have never come across a stray penny without picking it up—on walks in my neighborhood, in parking lots, under sofa cushions, on the floor of the car. I then drop the found pennies in a little cup that lives on the window sill in the kitchen. These tiny treasures remind me somehow of God's unbounded grace.

In today's gospel Jesus goes out and sits beside the sea. As the crowds gather he climbs into a boat, and from there he begins to tell a story. Not just any story, but a parable, a curve ball of a story that leaves his listeners to ponder its meaning for the rest of their days. *Listen!* he begins. *A sower goes out to sow.* And then he spins a yarn that must have sounded to his listeners like sheer foolishness. Sowing without first tilling the field? Wasting seeds that have been sorted, saved, and protected all winter only to have them carried away by birds and choked by weeds? I can imagine them thinking, Jesus, don't we have a hard enough time getting food on the table without throwing away perfectly good seed?

We know, because we know who Jesus was, that he did in fact understand their worries and struggles, their fears and heartaches at least as well and probably better than they did, and we know, because we're well versed in parables and have heard this story before, that Jesus is not being intentionally obtuse. Rather, he is evoking, in the midst of all their misery and longing, a vision for a different kind of world, the world as it can be when all the striving and greed, the violence and cruelty, falls away. A world in which everyone has enough and can live without fear in peace. In some of his other stories Jesus names this world the kingdom of heaven.

Immediately before today's lesson, in Chapter 12, Jesus has tangled with the religious authorities who have by this time begun to accuse him and are plotting to get rid of him. And his anxious family has been looking for him, no doubt wanting to reign him in before he gets himself into even more trouble. But despite their threats and warnings, Jesus keeps to his own path—teaching, healing, proclaiming good news. Which is what he will continue to do throughout the remaining fifteen chapters of Matthew's gospel.

About her childhood experience, Annie Dillard reflects, "*The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand.*" Be it a muskrat kit paddling from its den in the creek; red-winged blackbirds making a racket in a nearby tree; the day's last light before nightfall. *Do you count (these things chips) of copper only, and go your rueful way?* she muses. *It is dire poverty indeed when a man is so malnourished and fatigued that he won't stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will*

*literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted with pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days.”*

Dillard's parable, it seems to me, is getting at the same hard-to-pin-down idea as Jesus's parable: a generosity which is infinite; a generosity that says, there's more where this came from. A generosity that doesn't come undone even when it is misused, ignored, or misunderstood. The catch is you need eyes to see, or in the case of Jesus speaking to the crowds, ears to hear. Abundance, joy, grace. It's not cheap, but it is absolutely free.

You may be thinking about now that both of these parables—the sower of seeds and the planter of pennies—are nonsense given the harsh facts of our collective lives; the whole world is broken to pieces and our hearts along with it. Surely throwing caution along with seeds to the wind is not the answer, nor is living in perpetual awestruck wonder of the natural world.

In Sunday School I learned the parable of the sower was about trying really hard to make of myself good soil so that good results could come from the seeds planted in me. There's truth in that for sure. But now I am living in a different season and am wondering: what if we were to place ourselves in the parable, not as the soil, but as the sower? What if we were to put down, at least when it comes to loving God, the world, and each other, all our nose-to-the-grindstone striving and just offered to our soul-starved world whatever it is we have to give?

Vincent van Gogh sold exactly one painting during his lifetime, but he just kept painting—900 paintings over a period of about ten years. Today those paintings are scattered all over the world in prestigious museums. Annie Dillard, convinced that no one would pay a lick of attention to the longhand scratchings of a Virginia housewife, just kept writing. Decades later she would stop accepting honorary degrees because wearing high heels to accept another award was more than she was willing to do.

Jesus, of course, is the sower. He faced bitter opposition every step of the way during his three year ministry. But he just kept spreading good news and ultimately a few disciples did in fact carry his message to the ends of the earth. Which is why we are gathered here today. As for you and

me? We may or may not experience so-called success as the world defines it. But the invitation to join Jesus in the sowing is available to us even now.

Most of us will leave church today and go on our rueful way. But this I can promise. Come back next week and there will be more good news. There will be more bread and more wine; there will be more friendship, more grace, and it will flow from here the week after that and the week after that and the year after that and on and on.

Our life is indeed a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, so don't bother trying to make sense of it. If you find a penny, pick it up. If you have some love, give it. And leave the end of your story in God's good hands.