

A Mower Went Out to Mow

^{NRS} Mar 4:1 Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.² He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:³ "Listen! A sower went out to sow.⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil.⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."⁹ And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

I never saw my grandfather scatter seeds like you hear about in this parable. I saw him climb up onto that old blue Ford tractor and head into the fields plenty of times, though. In fact I was thinking this week if Jesus would have known gramps he wouldn't talked about a sower who went out to sow- he would have talked about a mower who went out to mow.

When I was thinking about my grandfather this week, this parable kept coming into my mind. While there's so much abundance and success at the end of the parable- the good soil doesn't come easily for farmer in the story. In fact most of the parable talks about how hard things are for this farmer- how much seed he loses before he ever sees anything grow- but how he keeps scattering away anyway.

Did you notice that? First the farmer sows seed on the path and birds come and pick them up- before they can even take root. Then, he scatters them among some rocks- there the seed takes root, but the sun comes out and scorches them. Undaunted he throws some down on some better soil, but there some thorns grow up and choke the crops

before they bear any grain. And then finally, FINALLY, this farmer lucks into good soil- and there the grain bears forty, sixty, and hundredfold.

So much hard work- so much waiting. I think my grandfather would have nodded his head at this story. I think he might have smiled knowingly. For while he ended up knowing good soil in his life, it certainly didn't come easy.

His life didn't even start out easy. He was born as a 12 pound baby in 1917. Today, they would have induced him long before he got that big, but they did the best they could. But it wasn't nearly good enough. His mother died as a result of his size, and he suffered damage to his arm in childbirth that lasted his whole life long. You know, working through the great depression was hard enough for most folks- but to go through all of that and work through all of that with an injury, why that demanded a certain kind of toughness. My granddad was a quiet man, a gentle man, but there was a strength in him you could feel when you worked with him- the kind of strength that only comes through some adversity.

And his injury certainly wasn't his only obstacle. If you knew Robert, one of the things that marked him throughout his days was a passion, a hunger for learning. He placed an incredible value on education. When I became a little older I began to discover that underneath his love for education there was some pain, though. He was a gifted student as a young man, and even won a scholarship to go to school, but even with this scholarship he still didn't have the money to pay for college. And while he was so proud of his brothers and his children for getting their degrees, that he didn't was a source of sadness for him I think. But just like that farmer who was losing seeds to birds and weeds but kept on going- this missed opportunity didn't slow him down much. When I

was about 12, I remember visiting and seeing him pick up a book with funny letters on the cover. “What’s that?” I asked wrinkling my nose. Without looking up he said, “Russian. I’m learning Russian.” Now, I don’t know how many farmers in Western Pennsylvania decide to take up Russian in their seventies, but I’m guessing he was pretty unique in this. Maybe he wasn’t able to get a degree, but Robert kept his mind alive every day of his life.

And the hardness of life he knew as a young man certainly didn’t blunt his sense of humor or his love for life, either. A couple of years back we were sitting on the porch, and I asked him what the craziest thing he ever did was. And he got this big grin on his face and he told me when he was a young man he had these two friends. And they got the bright idea to make a diving suit- you know one of those old school kind of suits with the huge brass helmets and the suit made all out of rubber. I asked him why. He said he had no idea- it just seemed like something good to do. He said they worked and worked, and finally they came up with this ugly looking helmet thing they taped onto this old suit they found somewhere and attached an air hose to it with a bicycle pump to pump the air into it. Hey, who could have known this wasn’t going to turn out well? Now, I don’t know how they figured who it was who was going to test this thing, but gramps was either smart or lucky, because he stayed top side. He said they put their friend into this thing, and it was so heavy he could barely stand up. Undaunted, they shoved him into the water where he sank like a stone. He said that thing leaked like a sieve, and their friend was yanking on the rope with everything he had telling them to get him out of there. Well, you can imagine the kid nearly drowned, but they fished him out all right, and they had a story that stayed with them their whole lives long.

Now, I should say- a lot of folks who read this parable notice the difficult circumstances of all these birds and weeds and what not; but they also notice that this farmer isn't exactly helping himself out here, either. I mean no one is making him scatter this seed into rocks and blackberry bushes. The farmer has to see he played a role in all those seeds going AWOL. I think anytime you want to remember someone honestly, you have to see their rougher edges, too. And this is true of my grandfather as well- he could be aloof from time to time. He could get a little lost in what he was doing, especially when he was working. Once he was up in a tree trimming some branches off. And he was bracing himself on one of the limbs, when all of a sudden he realized that he was actually sawing off the limb he was holding onto. But it was too late- down he went, glasses going one way, the chainsaw flying in the other. My favorite part is that you know chainsaws have those safeties on them, so you have to hold down the safety and the throttle to make them work- well this really gets inconvenient after a while, so granddad taped down the safety. I imagine this seemed like a better idea until the chainsaw was flying through the air. And if it sounds like I'm making fun of him, my wife would be the first to tell you I only love this story because let's just say I've encountered my own difficulties with power tools. I like to tell her I'm not careless, it's just that mishaps are just part of the family tradition. She just tells me it's probably for the best that I'm a pastor.

So, lost seeds and difficulty. My grandfather knew all about lost seeds, and hardship, about potential never realized- but, but more than this, he also knew good soil in his life. Like the farmer in this parable, my grandfather knew good, rich soil and he

knew what it was to flourish- thirty, sixty, and hundred fold. In 1944 he met the love of his life in Fay Garman. He loved her enough to work for her father, who was not an easy man to get along with. They eventually got their own place in Boardman, Ohio- where both their children Larry and Linda were born. And after Ohio, they moved to Northpark in Pittsburgh and then finally to the farm to the land he loved.

Always a worker, grandpa worked at Graybar electric for 32 years, and then for Berman electric in Butler for 10 years. One of the last times my brother and I sat down with gramps, Rob asked grandpa what memories he had of that time. And with a gleam in his eye he told us he remembered vividly the first time his store cleared one million dollars in a year- he said *he* felt like a million dollars when they accomplished that and you could just hear the pride in his voice. He was respected at Graybar and loved at Berman- at his retirement party all the secretaries joked about going blind after 10 years of his handwriting.

Oh he knew good soil, rich soil in his life- especially on that farm. As a boy I remember sitting up on their porch and just watching the forests surrounding the fields and crick below- how the forest seemed like an ocean of green, the wind creating wave upon wave flowing through the trees.

My best memories of gramps were when I'd visit in the summer, and we'd go feed the dogs, or just ride around. I remember once when I was quite young he asked me if I wanted to go fishing. I did, and with grandma protesting he loaded me into the giant, yellow toothy bucket of the blue tractor with our fishing poles and his tackle box, and we drove down to the hole in the big crick, the collie running alongside us. And he set up my line- we were just fishing with bobbers and worms. Now it had been raining and the

pool was big that day and we were catching sunfish mainly, sunfish big enough to keep. When we had had enough, we drove back up to the house. He asked me if I knew how to clean them. I think I just stared at him. Clean a fish? I had never heard of such a thing- I had this image of rubbing them down with a bar of soap. We didn't clean a lot of fish in the suburbs. And so we parked and we went over to the railroad ties in front of the garage, he put down some newspaper, and he took one of the fish and showed me how to scrape the knife against the scales to take them off. Then, he cut the head off. And then, he cut the fish up the belly and removed the swim bladder and the organs inside. And then, because the fish weren't really large enough to just take the fillet, he just cut down the sides away from the spine. "Think you can do the rest?" he asked me after he was done. Again, I just stared at him. Somehow I found the courage to nod, and he left me there to go inside.

Now, I was just a city kid, a suburban kid. I didn't really know what I was doing. And it was so hot down there in the driveway with the July sun beating down. It was a humid day and the flies were buzzing around me, and those fish were starting to smell. But I held my breath and did one. It was just as slimy as it looked. But I did it. But after the first I just couldn't bring myself to do anymore. I covered up the fish and went inside where I laid down on the sofa. Gramps came into the room and looked surprised and asked me, "Are you done already?" And I told him I wasn't feeling good and just came in to lie down, that I thought I had a cold or maybe the flu. He smiled and laughed a little, but didn't say a word. He just told me to stay down and then he left the room. An hour or so later, when it was time for dinner, he brought those fish up, everyone of them cleaned. And as we ate them the only thing he said was, "They taste better when you

catch 'em yourself, don't they." He didn't get on me for not finishing. He didn't make fun of me for being a city kid. He was just kind. Today I wonder if maybe he remembered what it had been like for him moving from the city to farm life- and how hard it had been to learn something new.

So to me, my grandfather didn't just know good soil and enjoy it there on the farm- he was good soil. His life burst forth with quiet, steadfast hard work, devotion, and care, sometimes thirty fold, sometimes sixty fold, and sometimes a hundred fold.

You know in my tradition we don't imagine heaven being like a giant cloud with a bunch of guys wearing robes and strumming on harps. That's way too quiet and sterile for us- we imagine it to be more like a giant banquet, a giant wedding banquet, where everyone is welcome and there is room for all. And I like this image for heaven, I do.

But when I think of Grandpa and Grandma Hood- you know what I see? I imagine just the two of them sitting out there on their porch at the end of a long day, a light breeze on their faces as the sun begins to slip down over their green hills. NOAA, the weather radio is giving grandma the all clear. And there they sit, all the hay has been made- the sweet smell hanging heavy in the air. All the animals are in, and the gates are closed, and all the tractors are safe from the crick. And the table is set, the dinner done, and the rolls, Grandma's hot rolls the Robert so loved are fresh from the oven. And there they sit, and there they enjoy one another's company. I see the two of them on that porch with a peace settled over them like a blanket- a peace that passes all understanding. Let anyone with ears listen- and may we all know something of this quiet peace. **Amen.**