

The most significant person who ever lived. Numero Uno, in all of human history, who would you put at the top of the list? When *TIME* magazine tackled this question several years ago, the top results were not terribly surprising: 1. Jesus. 2. Napoleon. 3. Muhammad. 4. William Shakespeare. 5. Abraham Lincoln. Going down the list, things got a bit more controversial. For example, Ronald Reagan at number 32 beat out Paul the Apostle who took 34th place. And they both crushed Saint Peter at number 65.

All of these folks are real people, of course. But who would be among the 100 most influential people who never lived? People who never existed, who never took a breath except in the pages of fiction? *TIME* also produced a book about these folks as well. Some of them are better known to us than actual historical figures: Sherlock Holmes, Wonder Woman, Ebenezer Scrooge, Don Quixote, Captain Ahab, Mary Poppins, Indiana Jones, Romeo and Juliet. All influential. All very significant. But none of them had a life. They only got a fictional life because someone created them.

You know their impact! Without such figures, we couldn't speak of a man having an Oedipus Complex or Peter Pan Syndrome. We couldn't describe women as Cinderella or Madame Bovary. We couldn't say we were afraid of the government being Big Brother or science producing Dr. Frankenstein's Monster. Our lives are much richer because of people who never lived.

Did you know that the Bible contains quite a few of these types of characters as well. The Prodigal Son might be the first fictitious person that comes to mind, but the Sower in Jesus' parable today is another fictional character created by Jesus, one of the most significant figures from his wide-ranging collection of parables. And, unlike a cultural character and popular icon such as Homer Simpson, the Sower has spiritual depth. No one else comes close, except for

perhaps the Good Samaritan and the father of the "prodigal son" -- people who are included, not surprisingly, in *TIME's* top 100.

In the Gospel lesson I just shared with you, Jesus faces such a crowd of admirers by the Sea of Galilee that he has to teach from a boat, while the people stand on the beach. Matthew reports to us that he tells them "many things in parables." Such stories do more than communicate information -- they engage people, sometimes delight and move them, and they almost always force them to dig beneath the surface to understand what is being said.

"Listen!" says Jesus. "A sower went out to sow." We can visualize the Sower in the field, and as we do so our imaginations are sparked. "And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up." Notice that the Sower is just tossing seed, not digging holes and then covering the seeds with dirt. When some seeds hit the path and are gobbled up by birds, he just keeps sowing.

"Other seeds fell on rocky ground," says Jesus, "where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away." The Sower does not seem to care where the seeds go, throwing them on completely inhospitable rocky ground. Not surprisingly, these seeds are scorched and die.

But the Sower keeps moving along, and Jesus says that "other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" Finally, a few of the seeds hit good soil and *voila* -- they bring forth grain in enormous quantities!

Now.....I have to ask, What strikes you immediately about the character of the Sower? He seems a bit careless, doesn't he? "The farmer in our story is not overly cautious," says a professor of New Testament theology named Donald Juel.

"He throws seed everywhere, apparently confident there will be a harvest in spite of the losses." He simply keeps sowing his seeds, believing that growth will come.

So what does the Sower tell us about Jesus? This farmer, a fictional influential person who never lived, has something to teach us about the most significant person who *ever* lived. You see...Jesus is not cautious about where he preaches and on whom he invests his time. He simply keeps sowing the word of the kingdom of God, even though it lands on religious people who wonder if he is possessed, on disciples who struggle to understand him, and on at least one young rich man who cannot part with his possessions in order to follow Jesus. The Sower keeps sowing and similarly Jesus keeps spreading the word.

In many ways, you might say that Jesus is like Atticus Finch, one of the top fictional characters in history. The hero of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus surpasses the assessment of his daughter Scout. In the opening pages of the book, she says that she and her brother Jem "found our father satisfactory." In fact, he was much more than satisfactory -- wise, patient, forgiving and brave. *TIME* editor David Von Drehle says that Atticus "is the man who will do what's right when the world is saying he's wrong."

Atticus is a white lawyer who defends a black man in a racist Southern town. As a character in the novel says to Scout and Jem, "There are some men in this world who were born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father's one of them." Atticus stands up for justice when it would be much easier to let the standards of the community prevail, and yet he isn't alienated from his neighbors. He loves his backwards, racist, fearful community even as his heart breaks over its shortcomings. Wise, patient, forgiving and brave. A man born to do our unpleasant jobs for us, and who loves us completely -- even as his heart breaks over our shortcomings. That's so Atticus. So Jesus!!!

The Parable of the Sower teaches us that Jesus throws good seed everywhere, knowing that most of it is going to be destroyed. And as followers of Jesus, we should be doing ministry and mission in the very same way. Perhaps the same careless abandon should characterize the church's ministry," suggests Professor Juel; "speaking gracious words without carefully calculating the potential for success." This means welcoming others as Jesus has welcomed us, and preaching a message of unconditional love and unlimited grace. After all, Jesus calls us to be faithful to him and to the kingdom of God, not to be successful in a worldly sense.

But there's more to this parable. When Jesus explains the meaning of the story to his disciples, the focus suddenly shifts from the Sower to the Soil. In fact, you could even call it "The Parable of the Four Kinds of Soil." When the emphasis is on the Soil, the message is that we should all be good soil -- people who hear the word of the kingdom of God and understand it. Jesus promises that the person who does so "bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

When you hear the word of the kingdom, don't be like the **path** which is susceptible to the evil one who "comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart." Don't be the **rocky ground** in which a plant "has no root, but endures only for a while." And don't be **thorny** soil, in which "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing."

Ok...if you know anything about farming, or gardening, there is a problem with the "Parable of the Four Kinds of Soil!" Soil is completely passive right? It simply sits and receives the seed. It cannot choose to be good or choose to be bad. It is what it is. If you saw a farmer shouting at his field and ordering it to be good soil, you would think that he was a little off his rocker.

So what is it that Jesus commands us to do? In a word: "Listen!" That's what Jesus says at the beginning of today's parable, and it's certainly something that we can do as active -- rather than passive -- disciples. Listen to the story of the Sower, and learn that Jesus is incredibly generous in the way that he shares the word of the kingdom with all the people of the world. Listen and learn that God's Word is incredibly fruitful, and that a great harvest is guaranteed. Listen and learn that the coming of the kingdom of God isn't something that we can control. After all everything depends on what God will do, and it is his divine will that should be put above our own.

Today, our takeaway, the thing we should take to heart, is that the Sower reveals to us that Jesus is the one in charge, spreading the word of God's kingdom. Our job is to trust what he is doing, and to share his message with joy and generosity. When we do so, we'll be feeling the influence of a significant fictional person who never lived, the Sower. We'll also be following a Savior who actually did live, who does exist, and who died and then rose from the grave to be with us forever. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.