

Steve Martin, in his book ***Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life***, talks about an idea that revolutionized his comic direction...what if there were no punch lines? What if there were no indicators about when to laugh (for example, Bob Hope's "But I wanna tell ya," or Jack Leonard's slapping his stomach with his hand)? What if I created a tension and never released it? What if I headed toward a climax, but all I delivered was an anticlimax? What would the audience do with all that tension? Theoretically, it would have to come out sometime. But if I kept denying them the formality of a punch line, the audience would eventually pick their own place to laugh, essentially out of desperation. This type of laughter seemed stronger to me, as they would be laughing at something **they chose**, rather than being told exactly when to laugh.

Would this insight and method also characterize Jesus as a teacher? As one who spoke in parables? Was Jesus intent on awakening within his listeners hidden and denied tensions at war in the world around them and in the world within them? The kind of tensions we wake up to perhaps on a Saturday or Sunday morning? The kind of tensions that haunt both our daydreams and our night dreams? The tensions between our understanding of the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world? Jesus tells stories that stir up these conflicting values and tensions (a kind of indirect approach that can get through the barbed wire of our resistance). But he seems to suggest no solution and offers no answers. The punch line belongs to us, the listeners. The insights that surface may bring us anger, tears, laughter, sadness, or resolve. But I think the

challenge is there for each of us, whether we come to an 'aha' moment or whether that 'aha' is delayed. The challenge is to work with the parable, struggle with it.

We do ourselves a disservice if we think 'but I've heard the interpretation, the allegory, in the 2nd part of the Gospel for today, and I now know what it means.' Do we really think that we can get rid of Jesus so easily? Do I not have to struggle with it at all?

(Some scholars believe that the allegory may have been added much later; it may be Jesus' way of explaining the parable one time; he probably explained it differently the next time he told the parable. Or it may not be Jesus' explanation at all; some scholars think it came from the early church and reflects their experience).

Jesus is the Sower who broadcasts his seed--the Good News of God's love (**there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!** period, exclamation point, full stop) freely, to everyone, spreads it out on all kinds of ground, most of which doesn't seem too promising, at least that's what we may think. Does Jesus fret over the silence? Does he worry about the pressure to deliver a punch line ("if you are the Messiah, tell us plainly, enough of these riddles and puzzles and stories")? Do the blank stares, the smirks or frowns, the lack of response get him down? Jesus seems not to worry about any of this, because he trusts and depends on the utter reliability of the Father. Jesus lives in the trust that the kingdom of God is already breaking into people's lives, appearances notwithstanding. He lives in the trust that the kingdom of God will arrive in its fullness,

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despite the stony ground, the incomprehension, the thorns, or whatever else.

What are the tensions with which Jesus confronts me? What am I, with God's help, doing about them? How am I, with God's help, "crying the Gospel with my whole life?" With all that I am and have, my time, energy, intellect, and money, what kind of job am I doing proclaiming the Good News of God's love for me and everyone else? Where is the punch line for me in the parable? Have I found it? Have I shared this with Jesus and with my brothers and sisters in the Church? Amen.