



“Sowing, Martin Short and 250 Years”
Matthew 13:1-9
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I don't remember the name of the book. It was a gift from a well-meaning church member on the occasion of my confirmation. I remember what it said. It was about God's plan for my life. God has a specific plan for you; the book told me. My job was to figure out that plan, stick to it, not stray from it and if I did that, I would have a successful life, a good and faithful life.

As an eighth grader, I was drawn to the clarity of all of that. Even at that age, I had this sinking feeling that life maybe was a little more complicated.

Fast forward a few years. I heard this song by the band *Dire Straights* called “The Bug.” Let's just say it provided a different way of looking at things. Here's how the song starts:

Well, it's a strange old game - you learn it slow
One step forward and it's back to go
You're standing on the throttle
You're standing on the brakes
In the groove 'til you make a mistake

Then the chorus kicks in:

Sometimes you're the windshield
Sometimes you're the bug
Sometimes it all comes together
Sometimes you're a fool in love
Sometimes you're the Louisville slugger
Sometimes you're the ball
Sometimes it all comes together
Sometimes you're going lose it all

I heard that song and I thought, yeah. That sounds more like the way real life goes. I still think so. You may not like it, but you know I'm right. You are sailing along, you are working the plan, things are going really well and then out of nowhere: cancer – a car accident - a pandemic. And the path, the plan - it just doesn't work anymore.

And this whole idea that there is only one way to move through life and if you find it you will have smooth sailing, eliminates things like chaos and failure. Two of the best sources I know of learning and creativity.

Which brings me to Martin Short. You may know him from Saturday Night Live or SCTV or the many television shows and movies he has appeared in. Now in his seventies, he is enjoying a peak in popularity, thanks in large part to the success of the series *Only Murders in the Building*, where he stars alongside Selena Gomez and his close friend Steve Martin. This story of three amateur detectives obsessed with true-crime podcasts has brought him recognition and award nominations.

The path to get there was filled with lots of ups and downs. His brother died in a car accident when he was 12, his parents died when he was in his late teens, his wife of nearly 30 years died of cancer in 2010. His daughter Katherine died of suicide earlier this year.

His professional life was also filled with highs and lows. I learned this from watching a documentary about Short currently streaming on Netflix. It's worth a watch. In it he shared "I would say my career has been 80% failure." And if you look at his life and career, it's not false modesty. In his early days he did a lot of sketch comedy and earned a reputation for outrageous and goofy characters. Short was in a lot of movies. Some of them were good and some of them really weren't very good. And according to Short, what is comedy other than a willingness to take risks and fail and get up and try it again.

It's the world of this morning's parable. The sower has an interesting approach to farming, flinging the seed in every direction. Sometimes the seeds grow. Most of the time they don't. The sower seems just fine with succeeding 1/4 of the time, which means that he is failing 3/4ths of the time, a little bit better than Martin Short.

Because sometimes you're the windshield.
Sometimes you're the bug.
Sometimes it all comes together
Sometimes you're going lose it all

Jesus seems to know that. In this parable that he tells, failure is presented as a good thing. A holy thing. A faithful thing. That is very countercultural. We live in a culture that adores success. We seek success in school, in sports, in our jobs.

None of us set out to fail in any part of our lives. But the truth is that life is messy and chaotic and not linear at all. And bad things happen and good things happen and life is less about long-range plans and vision boards and more about throwing throw stuff against the wall and seeing what sticks.

So, what does all this have to do with our nation's 250th birthday? We as a nation have known failure, experienced messiness. From the beginning the enterprise was flawed – a nation built on the conquest of native lands; a nation built on the backs of slaves. How often have we failed to live up to the promise of this nation? And. And. This same country freed its slaves, welcomed immigrants, invented airplanes, liberated concentration camps, landed humans on the moon.

Here in this country, seeds of compassion and justice sometimes flourish, sometimes they do not. We keep at it. We don't give up on the place where God has planted us. We avoid cynicism. Oh, that can be very, very hard to do these days but the world doesn't need our cynicism, can't do much with it. We keep bringing out deepest values into the marketplace of ideas that shape this nation. And doing that is complicated and fraught. And essential.

Yes, on this 250th birthday weekend, may God be with this country. Not in some manifest destiny, we are a Christian nation way but in a God is with all people in all times and places way. In a God cares about the lives of all of God's children way.

Back to Martin Short. Early on, he got used to failure. He got used to jokes not landing, sketches that fell flat. And he learned to shrug it off, to move on, to focus not on metrics of success but on the actual experience he was having with his colleagues, friends and family.

He developed a knack for mining joy and humor from unexpected sources. Like colonoscopies. He and his close friends Steve Martin and Tom Hanks regularly host a colonoscopy eve party. They all gather at Steve's house around 5 p.m. They all bring the prep solution and toast one another. They play poker and watch a funny movie and finish the prep. They have a sleepover and then all drive together to the appointment, and whoever lost at poker the night before has to wait and go last. Once the colonoscopies are over, they go out for a meal together.

May we too find joy in unexpected places. Because God is going to be with us in all of it, investing time and energy into our rocky, barren lives, journeying with us in the chaos. When we are the windshield, when we are the bug. When life throws us down to the ground and when we experience good things we didn't earn and don't deserve. God promises to be with us in all of it.

Especially when life is chaotic, there is God the sower, never giving up on us, showering us with grace, inviting us to see beauty and meaning in failure, in loss, in chaos, in messiness.

That is true for us as individuals, and it is true for us as a nation.

It may not seem like much, this persistent, hopeful investment by God. But these days it seems to me like it is everything.

Amen.