

Vincent Van Gogh and the Sower

By Steven Stuckey

Jesus began his most famous parable this way, “A sower went out to sow...” He goes on to describe how some seed fell on rocky ground, some among the thorns and weeds, and some on good soil. While many Biblical scholars focus on the nature of the seed, the condition of the soil, or even the expected harvest, Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh was captivated by the image of the sower. During his short artistic career from age 27 to 37, he completed over 2000 works including 900 paintings. The sower figure appears in 30 of them.



*Vincent Van Gogh- Self
Portrait*

Van Gogh knew his Bible. He was raised in a devout Christian home. His father and uncle were both pastors. For a time he pursued theological education. He left his



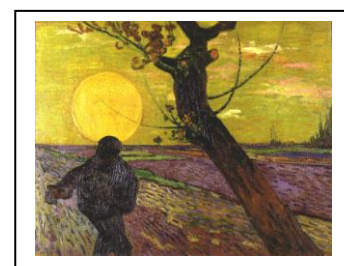
Women Carrying Coal

studies early to serve as a missionary among poor Belgian coal miners for two years. In his characteristically passionate way, he threw himself into his work. He became one with those he served. Like Saint Frances, he gave away all of his clothes. He lived in a wooden one room hut with a mud floor. When the child of one miner family came down with typhoid fever, Vincent gave them his bed so the child would not infect his five siblings with whom he shared a bed.

Though he was from a stable and educated family, he identified with and painted the humble of this world—peasants, prostitutes, coal miners, and postmen. He himself was a poor man who lived on the edge of society. He was sustained by a small monthly stipend from his beloved brother Theo. Each month he faced the choice of buying paint or food and he always chose paint. In a letter to his brother he said, “I feel at home in the laboring class. I feel that my work lies in the heart of the people. I must keep close to the ground and grasp life at its depths and make progress through many cares and troubles.”

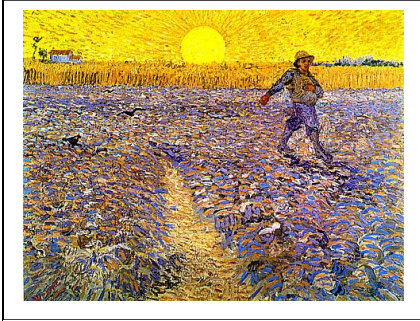
For Van Gogh, the sower was a metaphor for how a person might seek meaning in a world of cares, chaos and confusion. The sower was a humble man of faith who took seed with the capacity for life, buried it in the rich dark earth, waited patiently for the rain to water the ground, the sun to warm the soil, and the kernel to sprout green shoots that eventually became fruit ready for harvest. He understood that sowing was an enterprise shrouded in mystery and wonder. The

sower depended upon a transformative miracle between seed and soil, sun and rain before a grain of wheat could grow.



The Sower

Jesus taught that the process of sowing involved the death of a seed before new life could emerge. For Van Gogh, death was never far off. The women he loved found him too intense; his father and uncle thought him a failure and broke off ties; the mission agency officials said he lacked preaching skills and were embarrassed by his extreme identification with the people he served. Towards the end of his life he suffered depression and a form of epilepsy that cost him an ear and landed him in a mental institution. In his lifetime, he sold only one painting. By all accounts his earthly life was a failure. Yet he was sustained by the love of Jesus and his hope in the gospel.



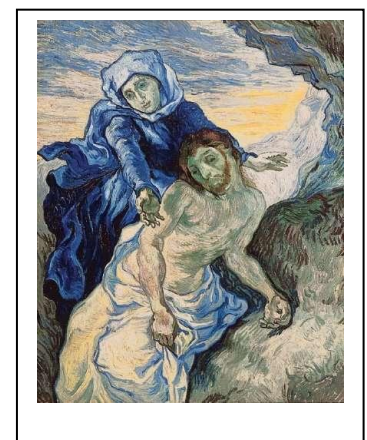
The Sower- 1888

This particular painting was completed in 1888 two years before his suicide. The plowed soil in the foreground waits for the sower and the seed. In some of his works, the sower was the dominant figure. In this one however, he seems almost camouflaged and hidden in the landscape. There may be a lesson there. In some seasons of life we will play prominent roles. In others we are to remain in the background to complement someone else's work of art. The painting also suggests that sowing, like life can be repetitive and monotonous. Lonely hours were spent lugging heavy bags of seed across uneven ground. And the effort may often seem futile. Precious seed scattered on the ground might be

eaten by the birds looking for an easy meal. The ground might be too hard or the rains may never come. Such is life. Many vocations have elements of sowing—raising small children, caring for the sick and dying, education at all levels, administration, business, counseling, the trades, art, pastoral care, etc. So how does one persevere in hope? Van Gogh gives us two clues. First, in the background at the edge of the plowed field he painted mature wheat ready for harvest. By doing so he reminds us of the purpose for scattering seed on the ground. Good and holy actions are not folly but have potential for producing a fruitful harvest. So keep your eye on what you seek. Secondly he painted a bright yellow sun and sky at the top of the canvas. In a letter to his brother Theo he said that the yellow sky represented for him the presence of God and the yellow sun represented Jesus. Van Gogh says visually what the Bible says verbally—I will never leave nor forsake you. I will always be with you. It is the presence of Jesus that transforms the mundane into the beautiful; the hard into the hopeful.

In the end did Vincent Van Gogh, the lonely tortured artist, experience what he painted? In July 1890 he expressed remorse that he was a continual financial burden to his brother Theo who had a young family and health concerns of his own to worry about. His epilepsy created psychotic episodes every three months that left him delusional and incapacitated. He knew another breakdown was coming. So on July 17th he shot himself in the stomach and took two days to die.

The day after his death, his artist's friends from Paris arrived for the funeral. His casket was laid on the pool table in the bare upstairs room of the café. Friends gathered in a circle but no one knew what to say. Then suddenly they realized that for a visual artist it is not what you say but what you see that is important. So they ran back to his room and gathered up all his paintings that he had done in the previous months. They brought them back to the café and hung them around the room. Each landscape, portrait, or still life used bright colors to capture the hidden beauty of God's world. Someone brought a bouquet of yellow sunflowers and laid them on the casket. At his head they hung the Pieta. Van Gogh used his own face as a model for the face of Jesus. He was sustained in life and united in death with his Lord. Then someone said a prayer and they took him to his grave.



Pieta

"A sower when out to sow..." Jesus concluded his parable by saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him here!" Vincent Van Gogh the visual artist might add, "He who has eyes to see, let him see!"