

## **15th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**July 16, 2023**

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I believe it's safe to say that most of us value success. When we apply ourselves to some task and the results are good, we feel satisfied. When our successful efforts are recognized by others, it is all the better. However, there can be a lot of pressure on people today to succeed. Resources of various kinds are made available to people to help them succeed in whatever task they have before them.

In a culture that values success, failure can be hard to cope with, whether it is failure in school or at work or in a relationship. Not measuring up to our own expectations or those of others can leave us feeling demoralized. Yet, we know from experience that sometimes our own expectations and those of others can be quite unrealistic. Allowances are not always made for various kinds of limitations, in ourselves, in others, in our situation.

In the gospel today, Jesus tells a parable in which both failure and success are featured. Much of the seed that the sower scatters on the ground is wasted. There are a whole variety of obstacles impeding his work, the birds, the rocks, the thorns. He can do very little about these obstacles. They are just part of his world. He knows he has to live with them, but they don't stop him from casting the seed. He is confident that in spite of all these obstacles and the inevitable failure that results, some of the seed will take root and mature, and that, at the end of the day, there will be a harvest to collect.

When Jesus originally told this parable, it was a kind of reflection on his own ministry. He was the sower who scattered the seed of God's word.

Much of what he said and did met with little or no response from people. What he said very often fell on deaf ears; what he did was often misunderstood. Even his disciples were often very unresponsive. Yet, Jesus was saying in this parable, that, in spite of all these obstacles and failures, he would continue with the work that God had given him to do. He would keep sowing the seed, because he knew that at the end of the day, the harvest would be great, or in the words of today's first reading, from Isaiah, God's word would not return to Him void.

In telling that parable, Jesus was not only speaking about himself and his life, he was also giving us a way of looking at our own lives. The parable suggests that there are times in life when we need to keep sowing even in the face of unfavorable odds. This is not to suggest that we are called to keep beating our heads against a brick wall. There are situations in which the prudent thing to do is to throw in the towel. There were towns that Jesus simply had to walk away from because no one wanted him there. Like wise, there are times when we have to keep on doing whatever good we can, even when it appears that the obstacles seem insurmountable.

When we are engaged in some worthwhile work, and things are going against us, we could probably find all kinds of reasons why we should give up. We may think that we are not getting the support we need, or that we are doing more than others are doing, or that our efforts are not really being appreciated.

Various versions of the birds of the air and of the rocky and thorny soil can threaten to wear us down. In such situations the Lord may be calling us to be faithful to the good work we are doing. It was Saint Teresa of Calcutta who said that the Lord does not ask us to be successful but to be faithful.

When we look around us we can see examples of that kind of fidelity in the face of huge odds. Perhaps we can think of those who look after an ailing family member who faithfully continue to care for them, knowing full well that the family member is never going to get better. Or the person who continues to invest in someone even though the return is minimal, or those

who keep working away at some worthwhile cause even when they seem to be getting nowhere.

This kind of human persistence is an image of how the Lord relates to each of us. The parable suggests that the Lord gives the most unlikely places the opportunity to receive his word and respond to it.

The human tendency is to assess the likely return before making an investment. We do our research, we satisfy ourselves that the outlook is promising and, then, we go for it. Today's parable indicates that the Lord is not nearly as calculating as we are. He casts his word all over the place, without discrimination. The unpromising soil is treated as generously as the good soil. As a result, the seed of life can be found in the midst of loss and failure. As Paul reminds us in today's second reading, from his letter to the Romans, even as we groan inwardly, as in labor pains, we already possess the firstfruits of the Spirit.