

Sexagesima , A ✕ D 2010

Luke 8:4-15

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 How do you measure success in the Church? Some count noses and gauge success on the number of people in the pews. If numbers decline or fail to grow quickly enough, these folks usually have prescriptions that will reverse the outflux. They work hard to transform churches and revitalize congregations, forgetting Jesus' promise that not even the gates of Hell can triumph against His Church. Some look for multiple ministries as a hallmark of a successful congregation. They work hard to multiply programs and ministries while reducing bureaucracy, forgetting however, there is one ministry through which God delivers faith and forgiveness. Some look for success in business models, presuming the Gospel to be a marketable commodity designed to attract customers. They cater congregations to seekers, forgetting St. Paul's admonition that there is no one who seeks for God. But success is neither on the Church's vocab list nor her to-do list. In the Church, success and blessing are not the same thing. Churches and pastors are not called to be successful but to be faithful.

2 A sower went out to sow his seed. As he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. "The sower sows; his reckless love Scatters abroad the goodly seed, Intent alone that all may have The wholesome loaves that all men need." Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Their hearts are impenetrable. They care nothing for the things of eternity, only for the things temporal. So, with relative ease, the devil merely swoops in and plucks the seed of the Word from their hearts.

3 And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. There are many who receive the Word of God, to whom the Holy Spirit delivers the gift of faith through the hearing of the Word, but who wither away when the heat of anxious doubt or persecution rises. In the world you will have tribulation. If the devil is unable to prevent a person from hearing the Word of God, he then sets to work creating great trials and distress, so that you might turn from the faith delivered to you when times of trial arise.

4 And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. Once more, this is a wily and cunning approach of the devil. Those whom he is unable to trick with persecution from the left, and is unable to rip God's Word away from them, he grabs hold of from the right and burdens them so that he might stifle the noble Seed of the Word in them with concerns for food and livelihood, with strivings after riches, and with lusts for the things of this life.

5 Some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. But the world has little patience for $\frac{1}{4}$ return. If your farm only yields $\frac{1}{4}$ of the acres sown, you should quit. If only $\frac{1}{4}$ of your loans don't end in foreclosure, stop banking. If only $\frac{1}{4}$ of your repairs get your customers' cars back on the road, don't turn wrenches anymore. Leave mathematics to the world and her businessmen. The business of the Church is not numbers.

6 Make no mistake, the Sower is downright reckless with His Seed, scattering the Word even on hearts that He knows will be infertile, raining into ears that will be stubborn and sealed to the Word. And yet He sows. When the Word fails to produce fruit, when the devil quickly snatches it away, when it is choked out by the cares of the world, when faith withers in the time of testing, the deficiency is not with the Sower or His Seed. The problem is the soil. When congregations fade out, when members leave, when people refuse to hear the Word of God, the deficiency is not with the Word. God's Word and Sacraments are effective. The problem is the hearers of the Word. The warning in the parable is less to those who have already hardened their hearts and plugged their ears to the Word of God than to you who are still hearing and receiving the Word of God. Repent and remain is the message of the parable. Repent of hard hearts and stubborn ears.

Repent of giving in to the devil's wiles in times of trial and temptation, in times of peril and persecution. Repent of allowing the thorns of worldly pleasures and pursuits to occupy a place in your heart alongside the sown Word of God. Repent and remain where the Word is continually sown and the soil carefully cultivated.

7 The Seed is the Word of God, and the Word is the Seed of the woman, the flesh of the virgin. The Word became flesh. The Word does not return empty but accomplishes the purpose for which He is sent. He takes the sins of the world, pulls the weeds and thorns and lets them be woven into the crown that will pierce his head. He works and waters the soil with His own sweat and blood, pouring from his pierced body. The infertile ground receives His crucified and lifeless body. And like a kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies and in the spring produces a healthy plant, He sprouted alive from the tomb. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the dead soil of humanity has a new hope. You who had only hope to return to dirt have hope beyond the grave.

8 That love is beyond comprehension, and yet His love is such that it suffers itself to be rejected. "Though some be snatched and some be scorched And some be choked or matted flat, The sower sows; his heart cries out, 'Oh, what of that, and what of that?' Of all his scattered plenteousness One-fourth waves ripe on hill and flat, And bears a harvest hundredfold: 'Ah, what of that, Lord, what of that?'" That's perfect love, not coercive, but freely given. The Lord Jesus has tilled the hard packed soil of your lifeless heart with His Law, stirring up repentance, causing you to see there is nothing good in you, no hope for salvation on your own. And He has poured the endless life-giving water of His Baptism. He continues to scatter His Word into your heart through the proclamation of the Gospel and the power of Holy Absolution. And He continues to plant Himself inside you in His Holy Supper. The Seed of the Word is such that it transforms the soil from dead to living, from impenetrable to fertile.

9 Good soil, transformed by the Word Himself, naturally bears fruit. It's not a matter of numbers. All God's elect will be saved. You are not called to be successful but to be faithful. The Word delivered to you is successful. Pastors are not called to be successful but to be faithful. The Word and Sacraments they are entrusted with administering are successful. In your daily vocations, neither are you called to be successful with the Lord's Word but to be faithful. God through His Word is successful. You through His gifts are faithful. *In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

Pastor Jeff Hemmer