

July 16, 2017  
15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

### **NO RISK OF FAILURE**

Have you heard that failure is the new key to success. I've heard and seen multiple stories about it on news and social media outlets. About a month ago NPR's main feature story on All Things Considered was about a very successful therapist who lives in the San Francisco Bay area a/k/a Silicon Valley. In 1981, Howard Warshaw was 22, had a Master's degree in computer science and a job as a video game developer for a little start-up tech company called Atari. Though many of you were not yet born, Atari was the original video game company. They took the industry from coin-operated games in bars where you basically played ping pong on a black and white screen and transformed it into the action-packed, interactive, realistic video-based gaming that is what everyone takes for granted now. He became the company's first superstar. In 1982, he created a video game based on the movie *Raiders of the Lost Arch*. They got Stephen Spielberg's approval and the game was a huge hit.

Spielberg liked the game so much, he asked Howard to create a game based on E.T. By that time Howard admits, he had a huge ego. He was totally full of himself and he had no doubt he would create another mega hit for the gaming world. He did create the E.T. game and it was a huge flop. Nobody liked it. Not the public, not Steven Spielberg, not even his fellow Atari employees. Soon after that, Atari itself started having financial problems and Howard lost his job along with hundreds of others. His whole world fell apart. He bounced around among the Silicon Valley tech companies. He was often unemployed. He had made millions working for Atari, but squandered it on bad investments. He suffered from depression.

One day a close friend asked him what he would really like to do with his life and he thought “actually I’d like to be a therapist.” Silicon Valley is full of people like me. By that time it was the 90s and Silicon Valley was going through another transformation. Instead of video games, everything was about smartphones and apps. Startups were popping up and failing right and left. People's careers were crashing and burning. And after everything he'd been through, Howard knew he was the guy who could help. He’s been a successful therapist for over 20 years now. He has a particular affinity for clients suffering from personal failure because he is proof that failure can be a necessary foundation for a successful, contented life.

NPR actually did a series of failure on the road to success stories over the last month or so. One guy was a successful entrepreneur who said if you want to be like him you need to go into knowing that you are going to fail. It is not going to happen without failure. They were all great human-interest stories, but I was skeptical. Possibly, they are confusing correlation with causation. I mean, I’ve known a lot of people who ever suffered serious failure.

And then I’m reading our Gospel lesson for today and it dawns on me that it is way more about failure than it is about success.

This is always called the Parable of the Sower. I’ve always thought it should be called Parable of the Sower, the Seed and the Soil. The Sower is God. The seed is God’s grace and the soil is people. There are four kinds of soil in which the seeds are sown:

1. Beaten-down, hard as a rock soil where no seed can take hold. These are the people whose hearts have been hardened and it doesn’t matter what they see or what they are told, they will never hear the Good News.

2. Rocky soil where the seeds could sprout, but could not take root. These are the people who, like the soil Jesus describes, are shallow. They are happy to

grab hold of something that makes them feel good, but when troubles come, they lose the joy and give up on the Kingdom.

3. Soil already over grown with weeds. These are the people who hear the Word, and believe, but reject Jesus anyway, succumbing to the temptations of the material world. They choose worldly success over Jesus. For these first three kinds of soils, it does not matter how diligently the sower works or how valuable the seed is. These seeds are not going to take root, grow and produce fruit.

Finally, there is good soil where the seed sprouts, takes root, grows, bears fruit and produces extraordinary abundance.

So, when it comes to planting the seeds of salvation in the world, there is a 75% chance of failure.

I've always assumed that Jesus intends us to go out and fix the soil—convince people to accept Jesus in their hearts, become good soil. But that isn't it. There is nothing here about mulching and fertilizing, or getting out the weed killer, or bringing in the back-hoe to dig out the rocks. He doesn't say be cautious about where you throw the seeds, choose only good soil. Jesus just explains reality. He doesn't write a prescription for a cure.

The reality is that the world is full of soil that is inhospitable, even hostile to the seeds of God's love. The majority of the time, the world will reject God's rule. Jesus says remember this as you go about your planting and you won't be discouraged or lose focus. Worrying about the soil isn't your job.

Guess what else? There is no need to worry about the seed. It doesn't cost you anything out of pocket. Yet, the seed is priceless and there is an inexhaustible supply. The 75% failure rate has nothing to do with any defect in the seed supply. No GMOs are required to enhance its performance. No special instructions on where and how to plant them is necessary. You don't even have to study the manufacturer's literature or plan ahead where or how you are going to plant your

garden. This is all quite contrary to our Presbyterian notions about good stewardship, moderation in all things and doing all things decently and in order.

Grab the seed and start throwing it. Yea your going to have a 75% failure rate, but that 25% is going to be so worth it. That one fourth produces so magnificently that even the least productive increases thirty-fold. A return rate that any investor would be thrilled with.

I know life-long Presbyterians and Presbyterian refugees from more so-called evangelical traditions are not too comfortable with the idea of going out and sowing God's word. But that would be because we assume from some of our fellow Christians who go knocking on doors asking "have you been saved?" It doesn't. But we are constantly sowing seeds. You all do it maybe without even realizing it.

We are flinging the seeds around with utmost abandon when 30 something adults and youth dedicate themselves to making sure 65 children most of whom we've never seen before and may never see again, learn about God's love in Jesus Christ and have the time of their lives doing it.

We are sowing the seeds when we send 9 Fellowship teenagers to the Montreat Youth Conference, nurturing them with our love, prayers and financial support.

Honestly, we are sowing seeds when we invite outsiders to use our facility during the week to play bridge, do Yoga and Zumba. Because we don't know when a seed might just take root in a tiny spot of rich soil in an otherwise rocky wasteland.

Opportunities for sowing seeds abound and they have nothing to do with asking people if they have been saved.

When it comes to sowing the seed of God's word there is no downside to failure. Just grab the seed and go.