

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – July 16, 2017
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If we had any doubt before, we certainly do not now. Summer is upon us. In Memphis, that means hot and muggy weather – day and night – with widely scattered afternoon and evening thundershowers. It is almost not worth watching the weather forecast in July and August – except to see if we have broken any new records. In this kind of heat, the only thing you can do is try to stay cool, water the yard, and pray for rain. The hottest summer on record in Memphis was 1980 when we had temperatures over 100 degrees for almost two weeks straight. I was working downtown as a tour guide at the Magevney House that summer. For one week during this heat wave, there was a square-dance convention in town and many, many people – in some pretty strange outfits – came by for the tour – though it quickly became clear that they really weren't much interested in pioneer school teacher Eugene Magevney and his family. They looked around politely and listened for a while as I pointed out objects of interest. Mainly they were drawn to the historic site by the one thing that wasn't historic – the air-conditioner.

At this time of the liturgical year – at least for the next two weeks – the Church presents us with images of sowing seed. In our climate, it seems out of place. We sowed seed months ago, in the spring. Now we are just trying to keep the plants alive. Any seed sown on the path has long since been eaten by the birds. Any seed sown on rocky ground has long since withered in the heat. The seed sown amidst the thorns is probably still growing, but because of the thorns, we have no intention of trying to keep that plant alive. It is only the seed that fell on the rich soil that we are still nurturing. For that plant alone we still have hope that it will produce fruit – a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold – as the parable tells us. So here we are – in Memphis, in July – at the conclusion of the parable, so to speak. The sowing was done months ago – we are merely tending to the plant or two that survived.

The parable that forms our gospel today is, of course, an image of evangelization. The seed sown in the parable is the word of God, the good news of the kingdom. Maybe it fell on the path of those who do not understand, or on the rocky soil of those who have no roots in the faith. Maybe the word was sown in the hearts of those who were so caught up in the concerns of this world that the thorns choked it out. Only those whose hearts were ready have received the Word of God and have allowed it to bear fruit in their lives. As Catholic Christians, we often hear this gospel passage, this parable, as an explanation for why some people have accepted the faith and why others have not. We see ourselves as summer Christians – the work of evangelization was done in the spring – we're just here to assess the results, to harvest the fruit.

We see signs of this summer Christianity when we become so pre-occupied with ourselves that we do not look beyond our own walls. We are happy to nurture one another, to water and feed and tend to the other members of our family or of our parish community. But that's where we stop. We're busy making sure that the seed that fell on good soil becomes a plant that bears fruit. We do not have time for those other seeds – those hopeless plants that won't make it anyway. We've adopted an attitude that is climate based. Why waste time with seeds that will not make it when even the healthy plants need so much help in this kind of heat? Certainly, we healthy plants – if you can call us that – those of us who have heard the Word of God and are trying to live the life of a disciple – certainly, we need the prayers and support of one another. We live in a climate of sin and despair. The heat of violence and selfishness and anger is powerful. Even the strongest plant would fade in this climate without the refreshing waters of God's Spirit. The landscaping tasks of summer Christianity are important.

But we are called to be year-round Christians – and that includes springtime as well. In addition to supporting one another, we should be constantly sowing the seeds of faith. Yes, some of those seeds will wither and die, some will get choked out by the thorns of this world, and some will be taken away by the birds, but some will find good soil – and the rocks in some soil will eventually be removed, and the hard dirt of the path will eventually be softened by rain, and the thorns will eventually be cut back. In other words, no person is entirely closed to the Word of God. They may not hear the message the first time. They may not be ready to accept the path of discipleship. But if we continue to sow the seeds of faith – at all times and in all seasons – then sooner or later the gospel may take root in their hearts. Evangelization means more than supporting current disciples – it means seeking out the lost, the abandoned, those who want God and those who do not yet know that they need God.

Of course, in order to evangelize, in order to bring the message of the gospel to others, we need to examine the seed that we are sowing. Yes, even in summer, we are constantly sowing seeds – in what we say and in what we do. We may indeed be sowing the seeds of faith – or we may be sowing the seeds of this world – seeds of sin and selfishness, planting discord and dissention. Our lives may be examples of faith for others to follow, or we may be examples of bitterness and self-righteousness. Yes, even in the summer, we are still sowing seeds though we are probably doing so unintentionally. Check the seeds in your hand, the plants that you are nurturing in your heart, the words that you speak. Do they grow from the love of God or from the love of this world? Are we planting the faith or planting only our own personal harvest? We Christians rest in air-conditioning from time to time, but we are called out into the heat – to sow and to reap, to plant and to nurture, to live the faith and to give witness to it with our lives.