

SLD07.06.08 14th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 13:1-9
Jill Oglesby Evans

“News Right Fresh From Heaven – the Story of Johnny Appleseed”

Today’s sermon is about a man who went out to sow, a legendary man, though real enough in our country’s history, who went out to sow apple seeds. And so fertile was the soil upon which this man sowed, and so fertile was the soil of his heart, that even in his own day he became known and beloved in “every log cabin from the Ohio River to the Northern Lakes, and westward to the prairies of what is now the State of Indiana, as ‘Johnny Appleseed.’”

But I don’t see how we can really move into Johnny Appleseed’s story or his message for us today until we’ve gotten his ubiquitous song out of the way. Now, Johnny didn’t write the song we all remember him by – the Walt Disney empire did, back in 1948, in a surprisingly sweet and poignant portrayal of Appleseed in a movie called *Melody Time*. Still, maybe because of the way the song captures Johnny’s simplicity of faith and good will toward all creation, or maybe just because it’s catchy, it has flourished as a kindergarten and camp blessing ever since.

So we’re going to sing now, with our children’s help. There are two verses of the Johnny Appleseed song printed in your bulletins.

...

Born John Chapman in 1774 in Boston, Massachusetts, two years before the signing of our country’s Declaration of Independence, Johnny Appleseed was the second child of Nathaniel and Elizabeth Chapman. Nathaniel Chapman was a farmer of little means, and a carpenter, who also served as an officer in the Revolutionary War.

It was while Mr. Chapman was off serving General Washington that John's mother died and he and his sister were sent to be raised by relatives. Mr. Chapman remarried and had 10 more children, sending John off to apprentice with a nearby apple farmer.

When John was 18 years old, he decided to set off on his own, joining the mass migrations to the west frontier of the nation. Now the "west" in John Chapman's day wasn't Colorado or California but New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana.¹ And people were flocking there with enthusiasm and high hopes.

John Chapman didn't have much, just the clothes on his back and a couple of sacks of apple seeds, which he had gotten for free from a local cider mill. But he had initiative, and industry, and plain ole' yankee common sense. So he set out westward, together with his little 11-year-old half-brother.

But Johnny didn't go just anywhere. Contrary to popular belief, Chapman was not one dreamily to wander the countryside randomly scattering apple seeds. No, John Chapman was a man with a plan.

His strategy was to search out especially fertile, unclaimed soil and plant *nurseries* rather than orchards, build fences around them to protect them from livestock, and leave the nurseries in the care of a neighbor who sold the trees on shares. Every year or two, he'd return to tend the nursery and check on its progress. This is the plan Chapman would follow for the next half-century, always moving ahead of the great immigrant flood ever sweeping westward, always planting with an eye to future markets, and seldom making a poor choice. (It's uncanny how many towns have risen on or near his nursery sites.²)

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Appleseed

² <http://www.swedenborg.org/jappleseed/history.html>, p. 2

Like any strategic businessman, Chapman was also one to pay attention to what was going on around him. In 1798, Congress passed a resolution to give land in Ohio to Revolutionary War veterans in thanks for their service. Only government bureaucracy and slow mail caused the veterans not to receive their land grants until four years later, in 1802. Predicting such a delay, Chapman decided to go on ahead to Ohio with his apple seeds and plant them, so that by the time the veterans arrived, his nurseries would have trees big enough to transplant. And to sell.

Now, the managers Chapman left in charge of his nurseries were asked to sell his saplings on credit, if possible, so he could trade for wares at a later time. But he would also accept corn meal, cash or used clothing in barter. Promissory notes for Johnny's trees never specified an exact maturity date, as this might prove inconvenient for either the buyer or the seller. Instead, despite uncertain times and environs, transactions were carried out in trust and generosity. Doing business was generally more relaxed back then, but, too, John Chapman's dedication to a simple and austere lifestyle left him less dependent on or concerned about his remuneration. Still, the success of his business combined with the impulse of his deep faith seemed to produce a character consistently able and willing to help others in need.

In an 1871 issue of *The Harper's New Monthly Magazine* the story is reported that (quote) "On one occasion, in an unusually cold November, while (Chapman) was traveling barefooted through mud and snow, a settler who happened to possess a pair of shoes that were too small for his own use forced their acceptance upon Johnny, declaring that it was sinful for a human being to travel with naked feet in such weather. A few days afterward the donor was in the village that has since become the thriving city

of Mansfield, and met his beneficiary contentedly plodding along with his feet bare and half frozen. With some degree of anger he inquired for the cause of such foolish conduct, and received for reply that Johnny had overtaken a poor, barefooted family moving Westward, and as they appeared to be in much greater need of clothing than he was, he had given them the shoes.”³ (end quote)

Chapman was renowned not just for his care of human but of animals, as well. When Chapman heard a horse was to be put down, as another story goes, he'd buy the horse and a few grassy acres nearby, and turn the horse out to recover. If it did, he'd give it to someone needy, exacting a promise to treat the horse humanely.⁴

Henry Howe, a man who went around to all the counties in Ohio in the 1830's when Johnny was still alive, remarked that “one cool autumnal night, while lying by his camp-fire in the woods, Chapman observed that the mosquitoes flew in the blaze and were burnt. Johnny, who wore on his head a tin utensil which answered both as a cap and a mush pot, filled it with water and quenched the fire, and afterwards remarked, ‘God forbid that I should build a fire for my comfort, that should be the means of destroying any of God’s creatures.’”⁵

What would impel such compassion and kindness in this eccentric if industrious scarecrow of a man? Well, it should be noted that Chapman was a wholehearted convert and follower of Swedenborgianism, a Christian belief system developed from the writings of the 18th century Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. The church

³ <http://mason.gmu.edu/~drwillia/apple/ja2sm.html>

⁴ Wikipedia, p. 2.

⁵ Wikipedia, p. 3.

founded on Swedenborg's principles, often called the New Church, or the Church of the New Jerusalem, still exists today, though in very small numbers today.⁶

A sort of gnostic compendium of Unitarianism and mysticism, yet Swedenborgianism offers a very generous view of both the goodness of creation and the full redemption of all humanity through Christ Jesus. Listen to these three key beliefs of the New Church found on their website:

"We believe that there is one God, known by many names. We worship Jesus Christ as our Lord and our God."

"We believe that people are spirits clothed with material bodies. At death our material body is put aside and we continue living in the spiritual world in our inner, spiritual body, according to the kind of life we have chosen while here on earth."⁷

"We believe that religion touches all areas of our lives. Our responsibility is to put what we believe into practice in our daily lives. All who do this, of whatever faith, are saved since they are living in the spirit of Christ's name."

If anyone could be called a saint of the Swedenborgian faith, surely it would be John Chapman, who, in his obituary in the *Fort Wayne Sentinel* in 1845, was described as submitting to "every privation with cheerfulness and content...devoutly believing that the more he endured in this world, the less he would have to suffer and the greater would be his happiness hereafter."⁸ But more than a concern for his afterlife, John Chapman's primary motivation was his faith's belief that all good actions are of God, and from God, and therefore are necessary for life.

So passionate was Chapman about his faith that he declared himself a missionary to the settlers of the new west. Indeed, in the Mohican country of North Central Ohio, he visited every cabin religiously, feeling that he had been commissioned

⁶ Wikipedia.org/wiki/Swedenborgianism

⁷ <http://www.swedenborg.org/beliefs.cfm>

⁸ Wikipedia, p. 4.

to preach, heal diseases, and warn of danger – in short, to help God take care of the settlers. He would tell stories to children, spread the Swedenborgian gospel (which he called “news right fresh from heaven”) to the adults, and receive in return a floor to sleep on for the night, and perhaps a meal.⁹

Reported one lady who knew Johnny in his later years, “We can hear him read now, just as he did that summer day, when we were busy quilting up stairs, and he lay near the door, his voice rising denunciatory and thrilling – strong and loud as the roar of wind and waves, then soft and soothing as the balmy airs that quivered the morning-glory leaves about his gray beard. His was a strange eloquence at times,” said the lady, “but he was undoubtedly a man of genius.”

Chapman also made friends with many of the Indian tribes and was known to have learned many Indian languages well enough to converse. Memoirs from settlers who knew him well indicate that many Indians held him in a high regard, and that his unusual zeal for serving others led some to believe that he was touched by the Great Spirit. For that reason they allowed Chapman to listen to their council meetings, and he was therefore sometimes able to avert trouble between a tribe and incoming settlers. He is said to have had compassion for the views and needs of both cultures, and the gift of being a fine communicator.¹⁰

Eccentric, industrious, faithful and kind, the man known as Johnny Appleseed spent the rest of his life wandering around Ohio and Indiana barefoot, clad in rags, a tin pan on his head and a sack of apple seeds on his shoulder, reading scripture, cultivating nurseries, and doing good where, when and how he could. He was not a

⁹ Jappleseed/history.org, p.3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

poor man; he was a business man. Not a goofy Disneyesque sower of apple seeds but a practical and skilled nurseryman. Not a dreamy wanderer but an intentional itinerant preacher who sowed the gospel with as much passion and energy as he sowed his apple seeds and saplings. He amassed money but used it for charity; became a legend in his own day but enjoyed it only insofar as it gained him access to food and a floor to sleep on. And, in the end, despite his altruism, at his death Chapman left an estate of over 1200 acres of valuable nurseries to his sisters, Elizabeth, worth millions even then.

You know, before Appleseed's name came to me as one of our summer saints, I didn't even know he was a real person. Now I regard him as more real and fully human being than many people I know. I confess that the courage and freedom of his eccentricities have particular appeal to me. As do the simplicity of his life, the focus of his work, the depth and clarity of his faith, the integrity of his impulses, and the compassion of his works. But I think most of all, it's just the peaceful, refreshing air of "news right fresh from heaven" that surrounds anybody who becomes fully who they are and what they believe, who does what is true and natural for them, who get up and goes sure enough wherever the Spirit leads them.

You know, when Jesus explains the parable of the sower to his disciples, he says "as for what is sown on rocky ground, that's the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, and endures only for a while, until trouble or persecution arises. As for what is sown among thorns, that's the one who hears God's word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what is sown on good soil, that's the one who

hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.” (Mt. 13:20-23.)

Seems to me God's Word found fertile soil in the heart of Johnny Appleseed. Makes me wonder, just how fertile is the soil of our own hearts?

Let anyone with ears listen.

To the glory of God. Amen.