

WHAT DO YOU SOW?

MARK 4:1-23

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The art of storytelling requires a story, an engaging teller and a willing audience. Jesus was gifted with all three elements. He knew when and how to tell a good story, to capture the imagination of his listeners, and to wake them up to new realities.

He taught them to see the world anew - not just the world in general, but their own world. Jesus didn't tell bedtime stories, he told life-time stories, stories that offered those who have ears to hear and hearts to see new opportunities. He relied on the ordinary stuff of daily living to invite people to change their daily lives.

The parable of the sower makes perfect sense in an agrarian society. It fit their world view. On the table this morning, I have one of my favorite images of the sower done by French 19th century painter, Jean François Millet: a sower went out to sow seeds ... to scatter or plant his seed so that the necessary crop would grow.

When contemplating this parable for my world, my mind easily conjured up Johnny Appleseed, the 19th century environmentalist John Chapman, made famous by Disney animators as you saw this morning in the children's conversation.

As so often happens in the world of storytelling, the truthfulness of the one telling the story is critical to the impact the story has. In the case of John Chapman, his true story has undergone significant changes and embellishments.

If you erase the Disney image we saw this morning, what you find is a description of Chapman as "a sinewy, barefoot figure with a goatish beard," wearing "something that looks . . . like a toga or a dress, . . . who appeared to many as a creature part man and part woman."

My transformation of Johnny Appleseed has been greatly aided by Michael Pollan's 2002 provocative book, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*. One of the four plants he researches is a weed from Kazakstan that evolved into the most American of fruits - the apple.

According to Pollan, apples and the man [Johnny "Appleseed" Chapman] have suffered a similar fate in the years since they journeyed down the Ohio together in Chapman's double-hulled canoe. Both then had the tang of strangeness about them, and both have long since sweetened beyond recognition.

When he journeys to Ohio to learn more about Chapman and the nature of apples, Pollan discovers that apple seeds do not replicate the fruit they come from. To do that you need to graft a slip of wood from a desirable tree onto the new tree.

Chapman however, did not believe in grafting. He believed that how we treated the things of this world effected how we would live in the afterlife. His religious belief encouraged him to let apples be apples as God intended them to be.

In Chapman's view an apple tree in bloom was part of the natural process of making fruit at the same time it was a "living sermon from God." The entire landscape he traveled and all creatures he experienced were manifestations of God's divine presence.

No doubt some of Chapman's belief's rubbed off on the pioneers he encountered, as well as his extraordinary benevolent nature. But the world in which he sowed his seed saw something different in the apple trees grown from seed that Johnny offered.

According to Pollan, apples from seeds tend to be sour enough "to set a squirrel's teeth on edge and make a jay scream." (p. 9) The seeds that John Chapman took into the wilderness, were way too sour to eat. They were more often drunk than eaten because the trees that Johnny planted produced "spitters." The reason settlers welcomed Chapman, Pollan says, was that Appleseed's apples were essential for making apple cider, about the only alcoholic beverage on the edge of frontier. Hard cider frozen to thirty degrees below zero yields an intensely alcoholic juice called applejack, which is 66 proof.

Reason enough why proponents of the later temperance movement chopped down apple trees!

By now you are probably asking what does Johnny apple seed have to do with Jesus? Surely he resembles John the Baptist in the wilderness. In appearance, yes, but Chapman also sowed something else. He considered himself the hero of a latter day biblical narrative, a man "anointed to blow the trumpet in the wilderness." Whenever he stayed with a new family, he would ask his hosts after supper if they were ready to hear "some news fresh from Heaven." Then he would launch into his Swedenborgian sermon "with a mystic's zeal." As Pollan writes, Chapman saw himself as a bumblebee on the frontier, bringer of both the seeds and the word of God.

And here is where Jesus and his parables come back into view. Over the past few weeks we have looked at parables from the perspective of Luke's Gospel. Now we turn to the Gospel of Mark and his most famous parable: the sower. We'll look first at Mark's use of parables then we'll rely again on the art of sculptor and theologian Charles McCollough to give us greater insight into Jesus' words.

Sowers have often been pictured as laborers and male, much like the man on the bulletin cover this morning. The most striking image McCollough offers though is the proudness of the sower as woman. This is not a person doing someone else's work, this is a woman doing work she has claimed as her own. The seed she offers the earth may fall in unwanted places, on well-traveled paths or rocky road; but even so an abundant harvest awaits.

In McCollough's view, the context of this parable encompasses the paths and rocky ground of Galilee hardened by Roman oppression, an oppression Jesus knew very well. Even so, against all odds he stood proudly in the midst of the Roman Empire and shared the benevolent and abundant word of God's empire, God's Graceland as I have called it.

In this land of grace, we are called not to labor in fear and function in self-protective modes of living. No - In God's Graceland, with Jesus as our model sower, we are to walk in hope and be intentional about the seeds we sow.

Jesus was both storyteller and sower; steeped in his beliefs about a loving, generous, extravagant God, he sowed the seeds of love and extravagant welcome wherever he went.

As followers of Jesus, our task is simple - we are called to ask ourselves what do we sow in our daily lives and how do we sow our faith? As Ella Wheeler Wilcox notes in our reflection this morning:

*With every deed you are sowing a seed,
though the harvest you may not see.*

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, so since I don't have a thousand words left in me this morning, let me leave you with something to think about ... a way to shift from Jesus the storyteller and sower to our daily stories and the seeds we leave behind us.

My prayer for each of us is a simple one: May we be intentional about the deeds we offer the world, may we sow seeds of love and deeds of grace, and may we always be open to Jesus as the divine storyteller who seeks to shake us from our complacencies and offer us a mirror of grace to transform our ways and uplift our life purpose.

Walk in hope, not in fear, my friends, and always be ready to give account in word and deed, of the hope Jesus has sowed in our lives. May the love you sow every day be a true reflection of the love you feel. Amen.



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