

Sowing Seeds for a New Tomorrow
Proper 10A 2017
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
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If you happened to find yourself on the banks of the Ohio River on a particular afternoon in the spring of 1806—somewhere just to the north of Wheeling, West Virginia—you would probably have noticed a strange makeshift craft drifting lazily down the river...[It] consisted of a pair of hollowed-out logs that had been lashed together to form a rough catamaran, a sort of canoe plus sidecar. In one of the dugouts lounged the figure of a skinny man of about thirty, who may or may not have been wearing a burlap coffee sack for a shirt and a tin pot for a hat... The fellow in the canoe appeared to be snoozing without a care in the world, evidently trusting in the river to take him wherever it was he wanted to go. The other hull, his sidecar, was riding low in the water under the weight of a small mountain of seeds that had been carefully blanketed with moss and mud to keep them from drying out in the sun.

These are the opening words of *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* by Michael Pollan, and the man they describe is John Chapman (better known as Johnny Appleseed), an 18th century nurseryman, who in anticipation of America's pioneer spirit, left his native Boston to plant apple orchards in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois.

As depicted by Tracy Chevalier in her 2016 novel, *At the Edge of the Orchard*, in addition to growing apples for eating, baking and cider-making; Chapman produced and sold applejack to thirsty settlers. Johnny Appleseed was not only a cunning business man and conservationist; he also was a missionary for the Swedenborgian Church. There are many tales of this scrawny and vivacious stranger graciously receiving the hospitality of local folks while entertaining children and adults alike with lively stories of the gospel told around evening campfires. Some say that by selling apple trees and alcohol, he was making money for his church back home.

Chapman became a legendary American folk hero, especially in Ohio. In fact, in the 1950's, when a local school board commissioned a well-known industrial designer to honor early settlers with the creation of a terra cotta figure for a civic auditorium, the artist chose Johnny Appleseed. However, that same Board of Education determined that Appleseed was too eccentric, so they re-named the sculpture in honor of another early settler.

In their day, many considered the prophets and saints of our faith – Elijah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist, Paul, Francis, and perhaps, most especially Jesus – eccentric and threatening. That's how many have described Walt Disney, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, John D. Rockefeller, Rachel Carson, Henry Ford, Susan B. Anthony, and even one of our chapel's founders, Bishop James Pike.

Evangelists and entrepreneurs have many things in common, most especially they often are considered outliers. These misunderstood pioneers and prophets were and

always will be hardy individualists whose witness, energy, enthusiasm, determination and creativity have made us who we are today and will make us who we will become tomorrow.

Our gospel text is a parable of one such character – a sower of seeds. In order to fully appreciate this story, we have to understand both its original context and audience. This parable, recorded in all three synoptic gospels, follows accounts of rejection and opposition to Jesus' ministry. It was told by Jesus to inspire the evangelical efforts of his first disciples, and the gospel writers recounted it to encourage the early church.

The parable involves a farmer whose planting style, according to modern agricultural standards, would not be considered very wise. But to Jesus' listening audience, it made sense. Whereas we spend a lot of energy preparing the soil for planting, first century Palestinian farmers scattered their seeds and then plowed the ground, sometimes hitting rocks, bad dirt and dormant thorns.

Does anyone really know in advance what's beneath the soil in which we plant? In my own gardens, I have discovered a buried patio, a collection of rusty bottle caps, a bounty of sea glass, and several whiskey jugs.

Jesus explained to his listeners that there are four kinds of soil – hard, shallow, thorny and good – each yielding a different response to the sowing. In his hometown rejection, Jesus himself experienced hard ground. When his disciples lost faith in a storm at sea or doubted the validity of his words, Jesus encountered shallow ground. Our Lord ran into thorns when the religious authorities tried to trap him and choke out his message. But thankfully, his seeds of God's wisdom also found good and fertile soil, ripe for planting.

You and I know about sowing seeds and bearing both the joy of success and the heartaches of failure. As parents, teachers and clergy, we are ecstatic when our children, students, or parishioners actually hear and follow what we have to say; and we get frustrated when speaking to deaf ears and walls of resistance. The local hardware store owner or independent bookseller relishes the importance of customer loyalty due to personalized service and the pain of being choked out of business by big box discounters and internet sales. Politicians from both sides of the aisle understand the thrill of passing legislation that matters and the frustration of partisan-deadlocked legislative assemblies. Farmers have watched their well-tended fields destroyed by natural disaster, and homeowners have witnessed their neighborhoods devastated by economic disaster.

The second half of the parable, which directs its attention not to the soil but to the sower, instructs us to keep our focus and keep going. As Johnny Appleseed learned firsthand, one cannot ensure the future of one's garden. Sometimes, the seed we sow is snatched up by predators; sometimes the seed never really takes root; sometimes it doesn't get enough water or sunshine to grow to fullness; and sometimes the weeds take over. More often than we wish, we plant and our seeds don't grow and we are left with weeds or bare earth.

The end of Jesus' parable offers incredibly good news – a miraculous yield, an outlier harvest. According to most commentators, in first century Palestine, a seven-fold yield would be a good year for a peasant farmer; ten-fold would mean true abundance; thirty-fold would feed a village for a year; sixty-fold would make a person rich, and one hundred-fold would allow a farmer to retire in luxury.

The good news of the Gospel in this story is about bushels of abundance. The opposition might eliminate the majority of the seed or choke it with weeds, but out of seeming scarcity emerges a remarkable harvest.

God calls us to be trusting (and to some, reckless) planters of life and love. The Gospel is not about good business or good agriculture. The gospel is about God's vision found and nurtured in unexpected, broken, and even desperate people and places.

As I look around our country these days, in spite of all the negativity in our nation's capital, I see lots of people, especially millennials, sowing seeds of hope and change, culture and creativity, sustainability and vitality, courage and leadership – seeds of new beginnings.

The local food movement – turning empty lots, abandoned buildings and reclaimed brownfields into urban farms, community gardens, greenhouses, and farm to table restaurants – is sowing fertile seeds for the rebuilding of rustbelt cities like Cleveland, Detroit and the South Bronx as sustainable places in the 21st century. Local oyster and clam producers are creating a sustainable aquaculture here in Wellfleet and other seaside towns. And farmers' markets across the nation are encouraging the growth of food, communities and connections.

Some of these seeds will grow into strong trees; others will result in bountiful harvests; and yes, some will not mature. As Jesus of Nazareth, Johnny Appleseed, Jim Pike, and thousands of entrepreneurs and evangelists have demonstrated, one never knows in advance the result of sowing seeds.

The message of this morning's gospel reading is simple. Wherever you find yourself, spread your seeds of justice, love and hope extravagantly, recognizing that every place and everyone has potentially good soil. Learn how to deal with opposition and temptations. Don't worry too much about the results. Don't waste your energy in places of resistance; move on and shake the dust off your shoes. Realize that some will prepare the soil, some plant the seeds, some will weed, some will water, and others will harvest. Know that there will probably be lots of thorns, rocks, and predators along the way, but that's just part of farming. Don't be so quick to second-guess, dismiss or reject the outliers for who knows what good tidings they bring.

And remember, in the end, God gives the growth; and we are called to give thanks to God for the bountiful harvests of our lives.

“Oh the Lord is good to me...”
And so I thank the Lord
For giving me the things I need
The sun and the rain and the apple seed
The Lord is good to me
Amen! Amen! Amen!