

## Sermon Pentecost 4/Trinity 3 (16.6.24)

**Readings: Ezekiel 17: 22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4: 26-34**

*May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

When I was at school (and that's a very long time ago!) we used to perform something at the end of term, much like schools do today - perhaps a play, or a show containing different things from singing to dancing to magic.

One year we performed a jolly musical called Johnny Appleseed - perhaps some here might know it, or maybe some here have even heard of Johnny Appleseed, because the musical was about a real person who lived in America.

Johnny Appleseed was not his real name. His real name was John Chapman. He was born in 1774 in the state of Massachusetts. When he was in his early twenties, John became a nurseryman, working with plants, trees, and shrubs. He especially loved apple trees and he planted them all around the town where he lived. But that wasn't enough for John, He wanted people everywhere to enjoy apples just as much as he did, so he travelled all around the country planting apple trees and giving away apple seeds (though I believe the apples he grew were more useful for making strong cider than putting in a pie).

Now John was a simple man. He travelled all around the country on foot, usually without shoes. He often wore a shirt which he made from a sack with holes cut in it for his head and arms. He had a beard and wore a tin hat. In fact, he often took the tin hat off of his head and used it to eat his supper from. John Chapman was a kind and gentle man who was liked by everyone he met. He became well known and people began to call him Johnny Appleseed.

Johnny Appleseed's life wasn't easy, but he loved what he was doing. He never married, but he had more friends than he could count. He lived a long and happy life enjoying the great outdoors and the beauty of God's creation.

You may be asking, "What does the story of Johnny Appleseed have to do with our Bible lesson for today?"

Well, for starters John Chapman considered himself a missionary of the New Church, a Christian denomination that became established the late 18th century and preached that nature and God are intertwined. He spread these teachings wherever he planted his seeds. So in more than one way the story of Johnny Appleseed is a bit like the parable that Jesus told in our Bible

reading for today. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he is asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but the man doesn't know how it happens."

In the Parable of the Growing Seed, Jesus tells of a man who scatters seed on the ground and then allows nature to take its course. As the man who sowed the seed goes about his business day by day, the seed begins to have an effect. First, the seed sprouts; then it produces a stalk and leaves, then a head of grain, and, finally, fully developed kernels in the head. Jesus emphasises that all of this happens without the man's help. The man who scattered the seed cannot even fully understand how it happens - it is simply the work of nature. The parable ends with a harvest. As soon as the grain is ripe, the sickle is employed, and the seed is harvested. This happens at just the right time.

Jesus did not explain this parable, as He did some others. Instead, He left it to us to understand its meaning. We know in Mark's gospel that Jesus had earlier told the Parable of the Sower and he told his followers to use that story to understand all the others. So by that parable, we can take the seed to be the Word of God; we can interpret the growth of the plants as the working of God's Word in individual hearts. The fact that the crop grows without the farmer's intervention means that God can accomplish His purposes even when we are absent or unaware of what He's doing. The goal is the ripened grain. At the proper time, the Word will bring forth its fruit, and the Lord of the harvest will be glorified.

Just as Johnny Appleseed was passionate about planting apple seeds, God wants you and me to be passionate about planting seeds of the Good News everywhere we go. If we will take the Good News of Jesus to people, it will take root in their life and begin to grow. We may not understand it, but that is the way the kingdom of God grows -- by people like you and me planting the seed and watching it grow.

In the early Church the idea was explained by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow." Just like a farmer cannot force a crop to grow, an evangelist cannot force spiritual life or growth on others.

I sometimes wonder if people listen to what we preachers have to say and think, "Oh there he goes again - he's telling us to get out there and spread the good news but I can't do it! I don't know what to say and I don't know how to follow it through."

I think this parable reminds us that we can overthink what we're called to do. Johnny Appleseed went out and planted seeds - he didn't know how many would grow, and he didn't really think about how they grew - he just went out and did it.

We know seeds need certain conditions in order to sprout. And plants need the right circumstances in which to grow. They need good soil, sunshine and water. Jesus is assuming that the plants in this story have those things. What he wants us to remember is that the real work of growing that plant is up to God. We don't have to stand on the sidelines and cheer for the seed in order for it to sprout. We don't need to hover over the plant and beg it to grow, saying, "Please grow. Pretty please!" That seed is going to do what it was meant to do, because God told it so.

There is power in the seed! Some time ago, archeologists dug into a pyramid tomb in Egypt. In that tomb they found several jars of seeds. These seeds had been buried with the deceased person 3,000 years earlier. Those scientists took the seeds they found and planted them in good soil. They watered the soil and waited patiently. After a time, those ancient seeds germinated and tiny plants pushed their way through the surface of the soil. Those tender plants matured and produced fruit. Isn't that amazing? When that seed found its way into the right soil, a secret work took place and life came out of death.

Remember how the parable began? "The kingdom of God." That's what Jesus is talking about here. He's saying God's kingdom will grow, even when we don't know that it is and we don't see how it can. It makes me think of places where Christians are persecuted. In some countries people are put in jail or even killed for being Christians. And sometimes it's in those places that the kingdom of God grows the fastest.

We do need to share the love of Jesus with others - definitely! But we don't need to think it's all up to us. When the Holy Spirit brings someone to Christ, it's like that little seed secretly growing beneath the earth. We may not even know He's working in someone's heart, but we can trust that what He decides to do He *will* do.