

Planting Good News “Johnny Appleseed” Style
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
February 1 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:29-39

And immediately coming out of the synagogue they went into the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was lying down with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And approaching her, he grasped her hand and raised her up. And the fever left her and she began serving them. Now when it was evening, after the sun set, people were bringing to him all the sick and the demon-possessed. And the whole city was gathered at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various illnesses and he drove out many demons. And he would not let the demons talk, because they knew him. And early in the morning, while still quite dark, he arose, came out, and went off to a desert place and was there praying. And Simon and those with him tracked him down and found him and said to him, “Everyone’s seeking you.” And he said to them, “Let’s go elsewhere, to the next villages, so I might proclaim there too, for that’s why I came out.” And he went proclaiming in their synagogues, in all Galilee, and driving out the demons.

I’d be willing to bet that some of you have had one of those really busy days recently – one of those days with one thing after another, when you’re busy from the time you get up in the morning until you finally get to go to sleep at night. I would also be willing to bet that the morning after that busy day you did *not* voluntarily get up before sunrise, eager for *another* busy day to come.

I don’t know if you caught it, but our scripture passage this morning continues from last week’s passage as one *long* busy day for Jesus. He starts out teaching in a synagogue, exorcises an unclean spirit from a man, then immediately goes to the house of Simon and Andrew and, finding a sick mother-in-law, heals her. At sunset, when the Sabbath is over, the people all over town, who I’m sure had been talking about him all day after his synagogue activity, swarm to the house – the whole town gathers at the door! He heals them, one-by-one, for we don’t know how long – maybe he never actually did get to go to a bed that night. After such a day, he rises early, before the sun, and goes to a desert place to pray. When his disciples cannot find him in the morning, they go seeking him, probably because the whole town, plus some from other towns, has again gathered at the door, and they have expectations for Jesus.

But Jesus has different expectations. “Let’s go elsewhere, to the next villages,” he says, “so I might proclaim there too, for that’s why I came out.”

Did you notice the word that Jesus uses there? He says “so I might *proclaim* there too.” NOT “heal” there, too. But *healing* is what this whole passage has been about – Jesus heals the people who come to him, it doesn’t say he proclaims to them! But, remember, it all started in the synagogue, where he was *teaching* with authority, and *then* healing. And that’s where it

continues now, where he redirects his disciples' expectations – Mark tells us that he went proclaiming in their synagogues, in all Galilee, and driving out the demons.

And so Jesus moves on, and the crowds are left behind, along with their expectations. And we might rightfully ask why and how Jesus could walk away from so much suffering, "humanity with all its needs,"...

Of the many words written on this question, Dianne Bergant's response sticks out: "Jesus realizes that the crowds are coming because they want miracles. He, on the other hand, wants crowds to come to hear the gospel he will preach, yet he still performs miracles. The demons seem to know who he is and what he is about, while his followers and the crowds he attracts misunderstand him and his mission. Everything in this episode," she writes, "is complicated" (*Preaching the New Lectionary Year B*). And we are still only in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. ...

Mark goes on, though, to show the other side, to expand the edges of the picture a bit. This Jesus was no celebrity-of-the-moment, any more than he was a magician (like some) or a rebel leader (like others). And, to him if not to the crowds or even to his closest followers, his purpose was clear. He wasn't about being a "sensation," or a success, or even popular. What he "came out to do" – his whole purpose – was to proclaim a message, *the Message*: The Reign of God at hand. From here, Jesus will push his disciples, then as now, taking them in new and unexpected directions, moving on in ministry to do what he came out to do, even if it's not the most popular thing to do, even if it's the very thing that will lead to his death. ...

And from Jesus' example we must ask ourselves – If the church truly is the Body of Christ, how do we live out our call to be healers to those who are "gathered around the door" of our church, seeking God's mercy? How do we live out our call to "proclaim the message," too?¹

There was once a man who lived out *his* call from Christ in a different kind of way. You've heard of him, I know – today we know him as "Johnny Appleseed."

He was born "John Chapman." He was born in 1774 in Massachusetts, and his father was a farmer. We don't really know much about his early life, but maybe his farmer-father encouraged him in being a nursery-man – a man who planted and cared for plants and orchards.

At the very least we know that Johnny seemed to have an adventurous spirit, and, not content to stay in one place, he decided to make his living going to the frontier – anything west of Pennsylvania, at the time – and decided to take advantage of a standing offer from the Ohio Company of Associates: in order to encourage *permanent* settlers on the frontier, they would give 100 acres of land to anyone willing to stay around long enough to plant 50 apple trees and 20 peach trees in three years, since an average apple tree took roughly ten years to bear fruit. A

¹ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_february_8_2015

savvy businessman, Johnny realized that if he could do the difficult work of planting these orchards, he could turn them around for profit to incoming frontiersmen.² And that's what he did. Rather than the random planting of apple seeds, or planting and staying to cultivate, he moved across the frontier planting orchards, and coming back to sell the land at the right time.

While he was planting his apple seeds and growing them in orchards, Johnny had another mission. He was a follower of the New Church, or the Church of Swedenborg, and while he moved across the frontier he also preached and proclaimed his faith wherever he could.³

John Chapman, Johnny Appleseed, was another man who probably had those who expected something from him. He was another man who, instead of staying in one place, went to other villages, to the frontier, with a mission. I don't *know* which was first priority for John Chapman, evangelism or profit, but the way he lived, with threadbare clothes and a sack of seeds on his back, suggests that evangelism won out. John Chapman's seed-planting wasn't only apples. He, like Jesus, also wanted to plant the gospel into the people that he met.

Christ's seeds sprouted and grew into an orchard that now covers the world with the gospel. And we as a church continue to follow his lead in going all over to proclaim the message, God's good news – online churches like DisciplesNet reach Pakistan, Germany, Kenya. The Democratic Republic of Congo has more Disciples churches and congregants than the United States. The good news of Christ is continuing to be proclaimed to the world.

And our congregation is growing in our city as well – not just staying in one spot, but also reaching out to tell the good news to the community around us, because that is why Christ came, and that is where Christ calls us – *to be the church* inside and outside of these walls, to these individuals gathered here and those individuals who may never come inside.

In these words of Christ, "Let's go elsewhere, to the next villages, so I might proclaim there too, for that's why I came out," we hear our teacher leading us to evangelism, to telling the good news, to planting seeds of the *gospel* – healing *and* proclaiming.

So what do we learn from Jesus in this passage? Evangelism as one important thing. But I think there's something else to learn here, too. "Planting good news" may not just be a geographic thing.

² <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/real-johnny-appleseed-brought-applesand-booze-american-frontier-180953263/?no-ist>

³ *Among Chapman's eccentricities was a threadbare wardrobe, which often did not include shoes and often did include a tin hat. He was a staunch believer in animal rights and denounced cruelty towards all living things, including insects. He was a practicing vegetarian in his later years. Chapman did not believe in marriage and expected to be rewarded in heaven for his abstinence.*

Think back with me, or look back with me, in your Bibles to the scripture we had just two weeks ago – the beginning of the story of Jesus’ ministry told by Mark in chapter 1 vs 14-15: “Now after John was handed over to prison, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news about God, and saying: ‘*The right time is fulfilled, and the rule of God has arrived. Turn around and put faith in the good news.*’”

Turn around and put faith in the good news. There’s proclaiming the good news, and then there’s *practicing* the good news. **What if we took from this story not just a message about following Christ’s lead in evangelism, but a message about the ways that Christ plants good news within our lives, as well?** What if good news in the midst of our lives means that we can *practice* things differently?

When Jesus needed to listen for God, to look for the call that God had for him, he removed himself to a desert place for prayer.

If you want to look for the seeds of good news that Christ has planted in your life, you, too, might need to remove yourself from the fast pace of your day, and find a time to listen. Father Thomas Keating said (building on St John of the Cross): “Silence is God’s first language; everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God.”

You don’t necessarily need a desert place. You don’t even necessarily need a place that is free from all noise. You just need to intentionally separate yourself from the constancy of *doing*, thinking, planning, and instead *sit* and make yourself available to God.

God is planting seeds of good news in every part of our lives – in the joy of a new baby, or a promotion, or a beautiful sunset over the mountains, *and also* in the fear of not being good enough, in the need for healing from illness, in the questions of *why*. God plants seeds, and in the silence we are able to find them, able to access God and hear God’s language. From that silence, from that stillness, the seeds scatter throughout our lives, throughout our busy days.

God is planting good news in *all* the parts of your life, not passing up opportunities. Hunt for those seeds, those orchard-opportunities. If you are going to plant good news, Johnny Appleseed-style – take advantage of opportunities to proclaim. And if you are going to find the good news that God has planted in your life, Jesus-style, practice being silent, and being still with God.

Amen.