

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **From Tiny to Tremendous**

*The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground... and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. – Mark 4:26-34*

Imagine for a moment that you are standing along the banks of the Ohio River in the spring of the first decade of the 1800s. The slogan from that time that remains famous was “Go West, Young Man, go West,” which at the time meant Ohio and Indiana. And thousands of young men were going west in search of land to settle and farm. So in the spring, you would have seen a ramshackle armada of vessels carrying settlers to the Western frontier. And if you were lucky you might have seen a makeshift craft making its slow way up the river. The craft consisted of two hollowed-out logs that had been lashed together for stability. One dugout was riding low in the water under the weight of a small mountain of seeds, apple seeds to be precise. In the other lounged a scrawny man of about 30 years of age. The man was already becoming a legend, and the legend has it that he often wore a tin pot for a hat, a burlap sack for a shirt, and often went barefoot because he had trouble getting shoes that fit. In the spring of 1806 he made his way up one of the Ohio tributaries for the first time to plant a tree orchard, an apple orchard.

His name was Jonathon Chapman, but you probably know him as Johnny Appleseed, and you probably know the grace from the 1948 animated Disney movie, which we can sing together:

O, 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.  
Johnny Appleseed! Amen!



JOHNNY APPLESEED.

Every autumn, John Chapman returned to settled areas to collect apple seeds from the waste pulp produced by cider mills. In the spring, he would take several bushels of apple seeds, enough for hundreds of thousands of seedlings, and make his way a little further west than he had been before but where a new group of settlers was beginning to arrive. There he would find a likely spot, clear the brush and the trees off an acre or two of land, plant his apple seeds in neat rows and build a brush fence around the area to keep out the rabbits and deer that might eat the seedlings. When he was finished his plantings, he

would find a local farmer to look after the seedlings, so that when the settlers arrived in the area there would be apple seedlings for them to purchase for a few pennies, or trade for a useful article or a promise.

He always worked alone, and never carried a gun or weapon of any kind. He was very knowledgeable about the medicinal properties of many different kinds of plants and the indigenous peoples he encountered came to see him as a medicine man. On the western frontier, he was an oddity, a vegetarian and a pacifist who abhorred violence against any of God's creatures. Legends grew about his ability to relate to animals.

But those who knew him personally often remembered his generosity, especially to children, for whom he always carried a little gift. He was a welcome visitor in the isolated homes on the frontier, and often stopped for a visit. But he would never accept the offer of a meal unless he was sure that there was enough food for the children. He carried his own food to share if there was need. After supper, he would ask if the family would like to hear "some news right fresh from heaven," and then share a reading from the Bible or from the writings of his favorite theologian, Emmanuel Swedenborg. And then he would leave the family a couple of apple seedlings to plant around their homestead and take his leave, having planted more than one kind of seed.



For nearly forty years, John Chapman planted apple trees on the western frontier. When settlers arrived, they often found John Chapman's seedlings ready for planting. By the time of his death in 1845 John Chapman was operating a string of nurseries that encompassed 1200 acres of prime real estate. I know that doesn't seem like much to a modern prairie farmer, but even today in the Okanagan, most apple orchards are only a few acres in size. The barefoot eccentric became a wealthy man, but believing his true reward lay in heaven, he rarely claimed more than a trifle for himself. Eventually, he became known as the Apple Tree man, or Johnny Appleseed.

The apple has its origins in the mountains of Kazakhstan, where wild apples still grow in forests, sometimes reaching 60 feet high. The fruit of those wild apples range in size from marbles to softballs, and in colour from yellow and green to red and purple. But the apple proved difficult to domesticate. Apple trees grown from seed bear little resemblance to their parents. The seeds from a large, sweet red apple may produce a tiny, tart green fruit, which is really frustrating for those who want the large, sweet fruit. Geneticists call this *heterozygosity*. "In the case of the apple," writes Michael Pollan, "the fruit nearly always falls far from the tree." [*The Botany of Desire*, p. 10] It was only when the Chinese invented grafting, sometime in the second millennium before the Common Era, that the apple was able to be domesticated successfully. The apples you buy in stores are never grown from seed, but from grafts. To make a graft, you prune a slip off a tree that

produces the kind of apples you like and then graft it onto the root of a seedling. The tree that results is genetically identical to the slip, and produces the same kinds of apples. Using that method, the Greeks and Romans cultivated 23 different varieties, which slowly made their way to England, and were brought by settlers to North America. But most of these established varieties didn't do well on this side of the Atlantic. The harsh winters killed many trees outright and late spring frosts nipped the rest in the bud. But the colonists planted seeds, and the apple's heterozygosity produced some seedlings that survived and prospered and were grafted and regrafted. Heterozygosity, the very trait that made the apple so difficult to domesticate, also turned out to make it extremely adaptable to different climates. Like the settlers themselves, the apple had to abandon its comfortable European domestic life and return to the wild before it could be reborn on this side of the Atlantic – “a fact that encouraged generations of Americans to hear echoes of their own story in the story of this fruit.” According to Michael Pollan, “The apple in America became a parable.” [Pollan, p. 12] Perhaps it was this that made Johnny Appleseed so devoted to the apple.

But by the time of John Chapman at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the apple had been established in North America for at least 150 years, and there were other orchardists who were selling grafted apple trees on the frontier. Even so, Johnny Appleseed planted seeds. He resolutely refused, apparently because of his non-violent philosophy, to graft apples. “They can improve the apple in that way,” he is reported to have said, “but ... it is wicked to cut up trees that way. The correct method is to select good seeds and plant them in good ground and only God can improve the apple.” [Pollan, p. 15] Johnny Appleseed earned his nickname by insisting on growing apple trees from seed. Which meant that most of the apple trees he grew produced fruit that was so sour that it would, in Henry David Thoreau's memorable phrase, “set a squirrel's teeth on edge and make a jay scream.” [Pollan, p. 9] But eating wasn't what apples were wanted for anyway. They were wanted for sugar, and the sugar was needed for fermentation. The settlers took most of their apples, pressed them, and left the juice in a barrel to ferment for a few weeks. This made a mildly alcoholic beverage which was the safest and most universal drink on the frontier, even for children. Where we drink coffee, tea, beer, wine, even water, the settlers drank cider, or on special occasions, the more potent applejack. It was only when Prohibitionists attacked the apple as a contributor to drunkenness that apple producers began to pitch the apple as something to *eat*, and came up with their great marketing slogan, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” But Johnny Appleseed's insistence on growing apples from seed created a huge number of apple varieties which adapted themselves to local conditions all across the continent.

I have taken the time to tell you in detail about Johnny Appleseed because I think the story of how he spread apples across the American frontier helps us connect the dots between these parables about seeds from Mark's gospel and the varied dimensions of our lives.

Jesus used seeds as a metaphor for the good news of God's kingdom of love, and how scattering such seeds would produce abundance in all kinds of unexpected ways. This morning's reading contains two small parables: The first emphasizes our lack of control of how seeds grow: *"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground... and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how..."*

The second small parable emphasizes how something can start tiny and end up tremendous: *The kingdom of God is like ... the smallest of all the seeds on earth, but when it's sown, it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."*

Both of those small parables emphasize that our responsibility is to sow seeds of loving words and actions and to trust that they will fall on fertile ground and produce good fruit. Our words and deeds are nothing more than seeds that we plant in the soil of God's providence, and they too show an astonishing degree of heterozygosity. We plant, but it is not within our ability to control the outcome. As parents, as volunteers, as neighbours, and in so many other areas of life, we scatter seeds and then wait to see what will emerge. If you are, or ever have been a parent, you know this. As parents, we prepare the soil and plant good seed, relying on gut instinct and what we learned (for better or worse) from our own parents, but ultimately, our kids will make their own choices, and they will often make some of those choices before their ability to plan and anticipate consequences is fully developed. One of the most difficult things that I had to learn as a parent was how and when to surrender control, how to let my children make their own decisions and their own mistakes, and to support them as they learned from those mistakes. My kids are on their own now. Sometimes, not as often as I would like, they might tell me what they are up to. Even less often, they might actually indicate a grudging willingness to be open to my advice. On those occasions all I can do is try to be as clear and as convincing and as succinct as I can be without pushing any of the buttons that create resistance. Having done that, all I can do is wait, for the good earth to produce good growth. Sometimes it is the hardest thing in the world to wait, without the ability to control the outcome, especially during those terrifying times when our kids go their own way, experiment with substances and relationships, and push us away. Then all we can do is "sleep and rise, night and day" and trust that the seeds we have sown on good soil will produce good growth.

As parents, volunteers, neighbours, workers in God's garden, we do the best we can. We scatter our hours, our words, our deeds of kindness and support and encouragement, trusting that they will fall into the good soil of God's providence and lead to good growth. But we cannot control that. These parables do not ask us to control it. They ask us to be like Johnny Appleseed, scattering the seed of loving words and kind deeds along the paths of our lives, trusting in God's providence to bring the growth.