

2024-06-16 4th Sunday after Pentecost Mark 4:26-35

SERMON By The Reverend Cheryl Kester-Schmidt

I grew up in Indiana and learned about Johnny Appleseed at an early age. He was born in Massachusetts with the name John Chapman. He worked in a greenhouse with plants, trees and shrubs and branched out planting apple trees around his hometown. He wanted people to enjoy apples as much as he did, so he began traveling around planting apple trees and giving away apple seeds. He was a bit of a preacher and Good Samaritan.

He tended his apple trees in the Pennsylvania and Ohio wilderness. He loved wildlife and was regarded by the Indians as a powerful medicine man. He was known to spout scripture and a favorite was from Song of Solomon 2:5, "*refresh me with apples.*"

Johnny Appleseed declared "with apples shall men be comforted in the wilderness of the West." His purpose - to bring, "some news right fresh from heaven" as he read from the

Beatitudes to the settlers he visited in cabins in the forest. He told them of the spiritual happiness he enjoyed.

Ironically, the apples produced were not like the ones we eat today, and the fruit was likely used for hard cider. This explains why many of the orchards he planted were destroyed during Prohibition.

He looked like a beggar with a beard, wearing his hair long under his cooking pot perched on his head. He was in Fort Wayne when he died in 1845 at age 71.

God wants us to be just as passionate about planting seeds of faith as Johnny Appleseed was about planting apple seeds. Which brings us to Jesus' parables in our Gospel this morning. As usual, Jesus has attracted a huge crowd. He has gotten into a boat which moved offshore so He could speak to them. This is not an intimate gathering with his disciples but a Master class being taught in the early days of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus uses parables to help ground the spiritual concepts he is teaching in everyday language and experiences familiar to

those listening. Both parables are about “the kingdom of God” and Jesus relates the fact to agriculture.

Let us take a side trip - when Jesus talks about “kingdom of God,” He is neither talking about eternal life nor about heaven. He is talking about God’s rule of grace in our hearts. When we hear the “kingdom of God” - think primarily of the faith God gives.

How does Jesus describe that faith? By telling the story of the Sower. And the point ? Faith seeds are planted, and we know little how it grows but it does and produces a harvest.

To us seeds may look insignificant, small and powerless yet, this is exactly Jesus’ focus in the second parable about the mustard seed. The ancient mustard seed was tiny; however, it grew to dwarf most garden plants and birds could nest in it. This speck of a seed produced a powerful blessing for many.

Our human minds cannot fathom the mind of God. We may think our God is small because He does not make a splashy appearance in our lives. His ways may seem dull and weak to us

such as saving people through the spoken or written Word.

Really? Strengthening faith through a bite of bread and a sip of wine? You are kidding, right? This is the omnipotent Creator of All? Well, yes this is exactly who He is. We trust Him with our eternal well-being yet might we be a bit ashamed of our God, which might cause us to not share him with others?

Let us go back to Christmas and the tiny babe in a manger. To some this scene is small and insignificant. God is not predictable and in a tiny baby our God took His place in time and flesh to save us from sin, death and the devil! Looks can be deceiving.

Understanding how faith grows in us is not explainable and a mystery. Faith is supernatural. We cannot press a faith grow button. We cannot take our faith muscles to the gym and make them stronger. The Holy Spirit uses the means of grace - Word and sacraments - to create and strengthen faith in such a way we can feel but not understand. We cannot grab hold of faith, but need only trust God puts it within us, cultivates it, and makes it flourish.

The faith seed is scattered and grown. God uses this tiny speck of faith to save us from our sins and at death, bring us to eternal life. This tiny little thing evolves into something that has massive, eternal ramifications for us. But not only for us.

As that faith seed grows, it is seen in how we serve others, the way we interact and treat others. It brings comfort to someone in need or peace to someone in distress. Your branches and leaves of faith provide peaceful shade to those around you.

My sisters and brothers, we, like the disciples, are expected to bear fruit by sowing seeds of faith - the Good News of Jesus Christ as best we can. Then, we step aside and let God do His work. We may never see the harvest, but He does as others are saved who hear His word. Growth takes place spontaneously, in the proper environment, and in flourishing the kingdom will become even bigger than the bush produced by the mustard seed.

In a March 10, 1522, sermon, Martin Luther preached about seeing the mysterious growth of the Reform Movement, saying, "I

simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Nicholas von Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses on it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."

(William Placher's *Belief* Series commentary on Mark)

This is most certainly the Good News of Jesus Christ!