

## Ambassadors for Christ

Mark 4:26-32

2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2

### Please pray with me:

*Ever-creating, ever-renewing God, we come to this place because you have planted a seed in our hearts and in our minds. We are here this morning because you've called to us. So awaken us. Open us to the newness of your Word in us. Help us to not listen for our own fears and reservations. Help us rather listen for you to call us by name. Lord Jesus, giver of the seed, giver of the growth, bring your Word to fruition in us. Amen.*

So, how many of you remember the legend of Johnny Appleseed? He's part of the folklore of America, right up there with Paul Bunyon and Pecos Bill. But Johnny Appleseed was a real person, who was born John Chapman in Massachusetts in 1774<sup>1</sup>. At the young age of 18, he strode off - often barefoot - across the country, starting apple nurseries everywhere he went. He'd get seeds free from the cider mills, plant them on land that Congress was giving away to homesteaders, fence it off to protect it from animals, and then move on, through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and eventually Indiana. Most usually, he left his plots in the care of someone else, and would rarely get any money for the trees he grew. He had a reputation for caring for the poor, for giving away his clothes and his shoes to those who were in need, and for going to extreme lengths to show compassion to humans and animals alike. He also had a passion for the Gospel, as he encountered it in the Swedenborgian Church. He never married, and never stayed in one place for very long. He was itinerant - homeless - and devoted his entire life to sowing seeds, apple seeds and seeds of faith. Johnny Appleseed may be the clearest embodiment of that faithful person in Mark's Gospel, who sows the seed in faith and leaves the growth to God's good care.

But it seems to me that Johnny Appleseed Chapman was not merely a passionate gardener. He was an ambassador. He was a person who sojourned into foreign territory planting something new—carrying new seeds, new ideas, bringing new life. It's perhaps a bit of a stretch, but I do believe Johnny Appleseed provides the perfect image for us to understand the connection between our two scripture readings today. The Gospel of Mark tells us about sowing seeds for the Kingdom of God, and the Apostle Paul's letter to church in Corinth tells us what it means to be an ambassador for that Kingdom. But what does any of that have to say to us today?

Let's listen together to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, reading from Chapter 5 verse 14:

*For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation! Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, and not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We entreat you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you. See, now is the acceptable time; behold, this is the day of salvation!*

Can you hear the urgency in Paul's appeal? The time is now. Today. This is the day of salvation. It's an urgent message. And don't we know it! Paul is writing to a divided church at the busy crossroads of a conflicted world that was undergoing massive change. On a global level, on a community level, and on a congregational level, differences and dissensions abounded. Paul is writing to a church much like ours, in a time not too different from ours. A community divided by disagreements and petty arguments and differences of opinion and wrangling over orthodoxy about who's right and who's wrong. In a world full of competing loyalties or no loyalties at all. Paul is writing to us.

Much like those in Corinth, we encounter headlines that reveal our conflicts. An elderly white supremacist shoots down a security guard in a crowded Holocaust Museum in Washington. A young militant Muslim pulls the trigger outside a military recruiting office in Arkansas. A fervent foe of abortion opens fire in a Kansas church, killing the Lutheran doctor who was serving as an usher that day. The Southern Poverty Law Center says the number of hate groups in the United States has risen 54% since the year 2000, fueled by opposition to Hispanic immigration, and more recently, by the election of the nation's first black president and the economic downturn. It's true, isn't it? The atmosphere is charged with anxiety and negativity and distrust. We're all a bit on edge—ready to snap--aren't we? If you don't think so, then you missed the article about the high school baseball game in West Burlington, Iowa, where the umpire found it necessary to clear the stands of the 100 plus spectators who were yelling and arguing so intensely over a baseball game that he feared violence would erupt. Over a high school baseball game.

You see, we all think we're right don't we? We're all so damnably sure we have it figured out, or we are owed something by somebody, or whoever does not live the way I do or believe the way I do or see the pitch the way I did is wrong and must be vanquished—done away with! We so entrench ourselves in our narrow understandings that we are unable to see above the pit that we've dug for ourselves. Christian and non-Christian alike, we suffer deeply from our need for the day of Salvation. Behold Now is the acceptable time. This is the day. It's urgent, my friends. It's urgent.

You know, Jesus' life was a real rebuttal of how everyone else saw the world. He hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors. He was homeless—an itinerant wanderer, a scatterer of seeds. He emphasized love over the law and was willing to break the law for the sake of love. He poked holes right through the clergy robes of the righteous. Some—no, many!—stood in judgment against him as a deceiver, a lawbreaker, a revolutionary, an insurrectionist - a guy who received what was coming to him on the cross. Yeah, it's true. Think about it. Many believed Jesus had it coming.

If you've read your Bible, then you know Jesus is the ultimate cautionary tale against those who wish to place themselves on the judgment seat and become judge, jury and executioner all rolled into one. The story of the cross is the story of the persecution of all innocent people; the story of all injustice inherent in our social systems; the story of the arrogance of all regimes who abuse their power; the story of everyone who complacently turns a blind eye to suffering. These are all forces in the world and in our communities that put Jesus on the cross.

And the story of the cross is that God loves us and forgives us so entirely and completely that he comes to bear it - to take it on - for us... God comes to participate as victim of our violence, and to rise from the grave to shatter evil and sin and death and to encounter hatred and bigotry and self-righteousness and apathy and fear and violence with arms outstretched to embrace and to bless and with a voice that offers forgiveness even from the cross.

*Therefore the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view ... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation! Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

We are a new creation. We're not becoming a new creation. We already are a new creation. The old has passed away. The new is here. Now is the day of salvation. And if we are a new creation, will we not see the world with new eyes? If we are a new creation, will we not have a new perspective? Paul says: we don't think in a human perspective any more—if we are in Christ, we get to see through God's eyes. A God who offers Shalom. Wholeness. Peace. Reconciliation.

And if we are reborn, if we are newborn creatures in a new kingdom—in the mysterious, secretly germinating kingdom of God—then this territory, this earthy place, becomes foreign soil. And we are now ambassadors—visitors from a foreign country, who speak a new language, offer a new perspective, represent a new government ruled by the Prince of Peace.

That's what Paul is talking about.

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;... So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.*

When we know the Prince of Peace, we are reconciled to God—we are at peace with God.

And where that kind of peace is known, it must be manifest in our peace with one another.

We cannot claim to have peace with God unless we are at peace with other countries, with

others in our community, with those in our congregation, and in our households. I'm not

talking about shrugging it off, or turning a blind eye, or hoping if we ignore the problems

they will just all go away. By no means! Peace is not equivalent to passivity. Reconciliation

is a proactive verb. Frederick Buechner said that peace is not defined by the absence of

struggle. It is defined and determined by the presence of love.<sup>2</sup> If we dare to call

ourselves Christians, we will dare to put down our self-righteous indignation, put down our

arrogant certainties, put down the fists we wrap around our ears, put down our weapons of

war and violence and greed and hatred, and take on our role as ambassadors for

reconciliation, standard-bearers, seed-scatterers for the Prince of Peace.

Imagine that. Imagine taking all the energy, all the emotion that is surging around

us, pouring the passions that fuel us into peace making. Imagine being able to harness that

dynamic into transformation. For its all in your perspective, isn't it? If we see with eyes

of the world, we will see a place where uncertainty is threatening and change is forbidding.

But if we see with the eyes of faith, then we find the courage to move past our burdens of

fear and brokenness, and participate instead in the unfolding reality of a future with hope.

I caught some of that hope this week. I heard it in these words:

"Violence is a dead end. It is a sign of neither courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children, or to blow up old women on a bus. That is not how moral authority is claimed; that is how it is surrendered. ... All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort - a sustained effort - to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings...The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God's vision. Now, that must be our work here on Earth."<sup>3</sup>

These are the words spoken by the President of the United States this month in Egypt, and I agree with them. Some say his speech was pie-in-the-sky, easy words about a peace that is impossible. But what makes them possible is not the effort of politicians, but the action of God. What makes them possible is the action already completed in Christ, embodied in the Prince of Peace. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; remember - from now on, we see with the eyes of faith. And seeing with the eyes of faith, we recognize the potency of reconciliation, lurking coiled in the seeds that are in our hands. I applaud the speech of Barack Obama. But let's not leave it up to him. We are the ambassadors for Christ. Let's stride out in love, liberally scattering the new seeds of hope and peace across our landscapes, 'cos Lord, we all know it's urgent. We have no time for enmity or hostility. Our embassy demands that we treat everyone as though they are already what they are in Christ - a new creation. Now is the accepted time. See today is the Day of Salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny\\_Appleseed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Appleseed), cited 6/13/09

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking*. 83.

<sup>3</sup> President Obama's speech in Cairo, Egypt, titled "A New Beginning." Cited from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/04/obama-speech-in-cairo-vid\\_n\\_211215.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/04/obama-speech-in-cairo-vid_n_211215.html), 6/13/09.