

**Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent**  
**Text: John 12:20-33**

*Can anyone see what it is I'm holding in my hand? (It's an apple seed.)*

I am a part of a group of seven Episcopal clergy that meets every Tuesday for lunch and to discuss the lectionary texts that we will all be preaching on the following weekend. We rotate between our various parishes: Holden, Rochdale, Shrewsbury, Sutton, Worcester, and Leominster. This past week we were at the Chapel of All Saints, in the Whalom section of Leominster. As I was driving home, still pondering this text from the twelfth chapter of John's Gospel, I drove by the Johnny Appleseed Elementary School in Leominster.

As some of you know, Johnny Appleseed was born John Chapman just outside of Leominster in 1774. He planted seeds all over New York and Pennsylvania and into the Ohio River Valley and beyond to Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. As some of you may not know, he was a Christian who envisioned a wilderness blossoming with apple trees—providing beauty and the wonderful smell of apple blossoms and ultimately a fruitful harvest.

There are connections for me with his ministry and this season of Lent—not only of the very Biblical metaphor of a wilderness that blooms with new life—but also this metaphor of planting seeds that is so central to the teaching of Jesus. His ministry reminds us (or at least reminds me) that all we need is contained in the smallest of seeds, and that our work—our ministries—our vocations—are about planting those seeds. Think about the vocation of teaching—which is always about far more than conveying information about the Civil War or the square root of 49. It's about planting seeds that have the potential to change lives. Every human encounter holds within it the power to heal and to transform.

Think of all the seeds Jesus talks about. He says the Reign of God is like a mustard seed that begins even smaller than this apple seed but then grows into a great bush to provide shade and shelter for the birds of the sky. He speaks of ministry as the planting of seeds: the gospel is planted in people in the same way that a farmer sows seeds, and for various reasons only some of them ever grow to fruition. In today's gospel Jesus is using the image of a seed as an image of resurrection of the body. He is preparing his disciples for his dying, and ultimately for their own dying as well. It's a metaphor St. Paul will also pick up on to speak about resurrection.

So Jesus says: “very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Deep within a tiny seed you can barely see lie the possibilities of full and abundant life: of not only fragrant blossoms but of a bountiful harvest. That is a great mystery that we miss in a society where apples from all over the world are available 365 days a year at Big Y. Only a few of us are as connected to the land as people were in the time of Jesus (or for that matter in the eighteenth century in this part of the world when Johnny Appleseed was doing his thing.) And I readily admit that with my two brown thumbs I am not one of them.

But if we aren't careful we can skip over metaphors like this without pondering their deep and hidden and mystical meanings. Jesus insists that you find life when you lose it; that when things die they are really in the midst of a process of transformation—that new possibilities too wondrous to imagine are already emerging.

Our Lenten journey has brought us in safety to this new day. A week from now we will walk through the holiest week in the Christian calendar—the journey from Palm Sunday to the empty tomb. On Good Friday there will be a variety of options to contemplate the meaning of Christ's death and passion:

- Morning Prayer, as the Gethsemane watch is ended;
- The ecumenical Way of the Cross service, with the various Holden congregations that begins at the Gazebo in the center of town;
- Stations of the Cross—a service rooted in Franciscan spirituality that traces the footsteps of Jesus, and
- The Good Friday Liturgy, where we receive communion from the reserve sacrament.

Four different ways to contemplate the meaning of the Cross; and yet even if you were to attend all four you would only scratch the surface. How is Christ's death a saving act? How is it that life can come from such a death? These are questions that point to a great mystery and no one sermon or liturgy can hold all the answers any more than a film that tries to capture the passion of the Christ can do so. But I think the seed that holds within it the possibility of beauty and abundant life is as good a place as any to start.

The Fourth Gospel does not focus as the synoptics do on the suffering of Jesus. Rather, from beginning to end, the Cross reveals to the mystical eye the-love-of- God-made- flesh—the Incarnate Word that has come into the world to reveal the Father's love for the world, in order to save the world. The gospel we heard today surely lies behind the collect for mission that is used in the daily office, at Morning Prayer. Remember it?

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you, for the honor of your name. Amen.

John's mystical gospel focuses on the outstretched arms of a loving God, arms that embrace not only the church—not only the faithful—but the whole world. Or as we heard Jesus saying in today's gospel reading:

...when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself.”

It's interesting that in the most ancient manuscripts it isn't even all *people*—but just **all**: all things, all the world, all creation. What happens at Calvary changes the world and restores it to blessing again. In that event, God's glory is revealed. It's an odd notion; how we can behold the

hard wood of the cross and in it see God being glorified. But God is glorified, not only through Jesus' obedience but through his complete and utter union with God.

One of the hardest questions that a parent or church school teacher will ever get asked by a child is about why Jesus had to die on the cross. It is tempting to resort to big theological words, to try to explain the various theologies of atonement. But maybe like that book about how everything we needed to know we learned in kindergarten, maybe it's true to say that everything we need to know about God we learned in church school. We just have to come back to it again and again with open eyes and listening ears.

Most nights at our house we sing grace: we have a small repertoire of several graces, but one that we sing often goes like this:

*The Lord's been 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;  
Oh, the Lord's been good to me.*

When a seed dies, it has the potential to become what it is meant for in the first place. In the cross of Christ we see the culmination of Jesus' life and ministry—we see why he came into the world in the first place: to make the love of God made manifest—even unto death, so that the world might live.

Notice where this gospel today began: some Greeks come to Philip and Andrew because they want to see Jesus. The attentive listener to John's narrative will recall that this is where it all started, way back in chapter one of John's Gospel, when these disciples were invited to "come and see." They now, in turn, are extending that invitation to others—to these Greeks; to *all* the world. *Come and see...*

The Greeks wish to see Jesus. What follows seems like a non-sequitor. But in truth it is very much an answer not only to those Greeks but to all of us. If you want to see Jesus, then pay attention to the world around you. Pay attention to the trees and your gardens and to the life that will soon be emerging again from a sleeping earth. Pay attention to those who are willing to lose their lives in service to Christ. Pay attention to all those places where people choose to live as servants rather than lord it over others. Pay attention to all those places where love and charity is palpable. Because there, God is being glorified. Because there the Christ is being revealed. Because there Easter, in all of it's wonder, is already beginning to unfold.

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