

The Purpose of Sowing
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As I read today's parable and imagined the sower walking along and scattering seeds seemingly without much care as to where they were falling, I was reminded of the happy-go-lucky images of Johnny Appleseed that I had seen as a kid. Maybe you can picture some of those images too: the friendly smile, the mush pot that he wears as a hat, the ragged trousers, the big barefoot step down a dirt road, and, of course, fistfuls of apple seeds pulled out of a burlap sack and tossed into the air with abandon. Perhaps the legendary Johnny Appleseed also scattered seeds right on the path he walked on, onto rocky soil, or into a tangle of thorny roadside blackberry bushes. But some of them, at least, must have landed in good soil, otherwise we wouldn't still be talking about this American folk hero. And clearly, some of Jesus' seeds found good soil, otherwise we wouldn't still be talking about this Christian Savior.

But according to Jesus' own words, only a quarter of his efforts will take root. As we consider our expectations for our own efforts – whether they are for ourselves, our church, or our wider society – do we feel satisfied that only a quarter of our efforts will bear fruit? As a recovering perfectionist (and recovery of any kind is a life-long process) I have an extremely hard time accepting that only a quarter of my efforts will be successful. I doubt I'm the only one. But if there is one thing I've learned from learning and trying new things lately, it's that my own unrealistic expectations get in the way of me seeing my successes. Even Jesus' success to failure ratio in spreading the word is one to four. So, when it comes to our efforts to strengthen faith in ourselves, increase attendance in worship, enact change in the world, who am I, or any of us, to assume that we would have a higher success rate than Jesus?

Our expectations can get in the way of seeing both the quantity and the quality of our successes. When I say "quality" I don't mean good or bad – though we do tend to make those judgements and comparisons – I mean the *kind* of success that sprouts from our efforts. It's not always the fruit that we expected. And sometimes our own expectations blind us to the effects that God had intended all along. But how do we know? It occurred to me as I meditated on this text that, even when Jesus explains his parable to his disciples, he doesn't describe what the fruit that comes from good soil, that comes from understanding the word, actually looks like. Our Isaiah passage doesn't specify what it looks like when God's word sprouts and brings forth fruit either. Except that it shall accomplish that which *God* purposes and succeed in the thing for which *God* sent it. Even when we strive to prayerfully discern what God's purpose is for us – individually, as a church, as a society – we don't always get it right. And the more we focus on our own expected results, the more we miss God's intended results.

Which makes me think of the legend of Johnny Appleseed again. Actually, not so much the legend as it lives in our national imagination, but in the identity of the actual person – a man

named John Chapman – the historical, societal context in which he lived, and the science of apple tree propagation. First of all, John Chapman did not actually toss apple seeds around willy-nilly as he passed through town. He planted intentional nurseries. He built fences around his nurseries to keep out livestock and wildlife that would have loved to nibble on tender apple seedlings. He left those nurseries in the care of local farmers and returned to them from time to time to check on their progress. Perhaps the seeds that John Chapman sowed were not just buried and watered in the ground but also nurtured inside the locals who he partnered with.

Here's the thing about planting apples by seed though: apple seeds do not carry inherited qualities of the apple trees from which they grew. If you take the seeds from a honey crisp apple and plant them in your backyard, you will be disappointed to find that your apple tree does not produce crisp, juicy, sweet apples. In fact, only about one in a hundred trees planted by seed will yield an apple that is even edible as a fruit. Henry David Thoreau described the taste of apples grown from seed as "sour enough to set a squirrel's teeth on edge and make a jay scream." To get the edible fruit of its parent variety, you must take a cutting from that tree and graft it onto another. When it grows, it will bear the fruit that you want. They knew about grafting in John Chapman's time. So why was he going around sowing seeds that would bear inedible fruit? If his purpose was to grow trees that would produce delicious apples for eating, his efforts make no sense.

The thing is that was not his purpose. He wasn't planting seeds that would bear fruit for eating. He was planting seeds that would bear fruit for making cider. What we would call hard, or alcoholic, cider today. But in John Chapman's time all cider was made to be fermented because that's how it would keep, so it was just called cider. And everybody drank it. Its alcohol content wasn't always as high as the stuff we may find in beer coolers today, and its main purpose was not to be alcoholic for alcohol's sake. Fresh drinking water that wouldn't make you sick was hard to come by, but the fermentation process of cider killed bad bacteria, and it would keep all year. Just like wine in the Mediterranean, cider in the United States was the drink of hospitality, and cider presses were the places of social gatherings. John Chapman's purpose in planting apple seeds was to bear the fruit of a healthy, neighborly community.

As we reflect on the disparities between the Johnny Appleseed of popular imagination and the actual historical person, can we think of ways that our expectations are based on a romantic, not-entirely accurate version of yesteryear? The good old days? The golden age? Good soil takes a lot of care and special ingredients. One of those ingredients necessary to bring forth new life is dead matter. Death and resurrection; it's kind of what we Christians are all about. It begs the question: are we clinging to dead things and trying to breathe new life into them, while God is trying to make something new? Can we let go of that which no longer serves us? Can we put to rest "the way we've always done it" and try a way we've never done it before? Can we look back on that "golden age" – of our childhood, of church, of our society – and consider that it might not have been golden for everyone? That it might not have been the only way that fits God's purpose, even if it fit our own? That it might not even have been as golden for us as we remember it?

In Isaiah, God is promising restoration and healing to a people exiled from their home. And God keeps all their promises. But God does not promise to restore things as we remember them fifty years ago. God does not promise the fruit of restoration that serves our purposes, and those sprouts certainly don't grow according to our own timetable. God promises to restore things to God's purpose. To the garden as it was in the beginning. To justice and righteousness. To the peaceable kin-dom. To life and love everlasting. May it be so.