

## "A Tree Is Known By Its Fruit"

Johnny Appleseed Festival

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It is truly an honor and a pleasure for me to be here with all of you and to be able to lead worship this morning at this Annual Johnny Appleseed Festival. I say this because like any love-centered Christian, like John Chapman himself, every day is an opportunity to turn our spiritual eyes inward (deep within our soulful humanity), toward God and Heaven, and marvel in the infinite goodness, compassion, and the illuminating truths of the Lord, which shine like the Sun in God's Kingdom of peace.

Yes, indeed, how blessed we are to daily look with gratitude upon God's many works of wonder, as the psalmist in *Psalms 145* reminds us, "**Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise. The LORD is gracious and compassionate; He is patient and rich in Love. The LORD is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made.**"

These are some of the many passages in God's Word that I imagine helped to feed and inspire the deep love and goodness within the heart of John Chapman.

In addition to turning our attention toward the Lord on this Sabbath Day, toward our loving Savior who saves and nurtures us every day, we are also blessed today to reflect about the core faith and values of one of America's true spiritual heroes--the pioneering spirit whose life and mission we honor this weekend, **John Chapman**, also known as **Johnny Appleseed**.

I imagine each one of us could reflect briefly and come up with one or two inspiring people from recent or ancient times who have made a major difference in your life. For me, **Johnny Appleseed** is one of these spiritual heroes. Why?

Because his life exemplifies what genuine love and faith in God are to me, shown through a life of usefulness, unselfishness and real caring for all people, all animals big and small, and for this great world we are blessed to live in and be a part of. John Chapman's life, his entrepreneurial spirit and desire to look proactively ahead for the needs of others as well as his own, and his gentle, peace-loving ways lift up the goodness of God that is alive within us all, and it is this kind of goodness and wisdom our world continues to need so desperately. Johnny's life and faith in a God of pure Love and Wisdom reflects the heart and spirit of the beautiful universal or pluralistic Christianity I fell in love with when I was sixteen years old---when, like Johnny when he too was a young man, I began reading and applying the wonderful insights and wisdom of the Lord's New Christianity, revealed within the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, a servant of the Lord.

It is easy for a pastor like me to stand up and say there is a lot for us to admire and appreciate about the life of Johnny Appleseed. Indeed, many books have been written about his life as a nurseryman and his benevolence toward all creatures and peoples. I first heard about Johnny Appleseed when I was a boy through folktales, and then as a

young adult I began discovering the real man behind the myth while studying the lives of America's great early Swedenborgian Christian leaders, such as Helen Keller and Charles Bonney (1893 World Parliament of Religions). Some of my own favorite things about the life and times of Johnny "Appleseed" Chapman would be:

- his wonderful connection with and compassion for nature and animals (beginning in his childhood when as his relatives recount he was able to whistle and call out to the squirrels, rabbits and birds and they would respond to him! He had an innate ability to understand the language of nature. And, as the legends about him depict (some that may or may be fully true), he went to great lengths to help and save animals big and small. One story tells of how he helped free a wolf caught in a trap, and how out of gratitude and friendship the wolf then followed him around like a puppy!
- his choice to not allow the early tragedies of his life to pull him down and away from his life's mission--his birth mother, Elizabeth, died when she was just 28 yrs. old (not long after giving birth to her third child), and Johnny was just a toddler, at age two.
- the way he made enormous use of the knowledge he gained as a young man working for General Harris, a farmer and orchard owner, who helped young Johnny Chapman to learn the "ins and outs" of becoming an apple orchard nurseryman, and then put it to great use helping the early settlers of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin to have a high yielding source of nutrition from their own apple orchards that he planted ahead of them along the pioneer trails of young America. For indeed, life on the frontiers of America back in the late 1700's and on into the mid and late 1800's was tough!

In addition to potential conflict with various Native American tribes who resisted their intrusion, the pioneers struggled with hunger, malnutrition, disease and countless other problems they faced all the time. And here came the altruistic Johnny Appleseed, who discerned the need of our westward bound settlers and kept several steps ahead of them, planting orchards of apple-bearing trees, using the seeds from cider mills near Pittsburgh.

- He befriended children of all ethnicity.
- Johnny Appleseed was a person who put his faith and love for God into action, which as Swedenborg wrote during the Age of Enlightenment, is the truest form of worship there is. With the aid of the broad and enlightening faith he read about in Swedenborg's teachings, Johnny demonstrated to the early settlers that rather than following the common pathway of using conflict and violence to get one's way in life, there was a better way, the same way revealed through God made visible in Jesus Christ.

By caring for "the least of these" among pioneer America, and by being a more modern-day "Good Samaritan" by giving medical attention to both soldiers and warriors from the Native American side, Johnny helped people to see that rather than God being seen as an angry God willing and wanting to punish the wrong-doers, he helped people realize and experience a vision of God that was nothing but goodness, mercy and compassion at all times.

- And also, that when people choose to allow their hearts to remain open, supple, merciful and good, the Lord can then plant seeds of spiritual truth within it (in the soil of a compassionate being), which allows the truths and wisdom of the Lord to grow.
- While helping our ancestors survive in the harsh conditions of America during the early 1800s, Johnny learned a beautiful, allegorical way God speaks and reveals himself to people while studying Swedenborg's writings. He came to understand an ancient language that much of the Bible is written in, "Correspondences." This ancient Bible code was often used by Christ in parables. It opens up the literal level of meaning, revealing an inner meaning of God's wisdom. Johnny therefore began to see this common language we see in Creation, how higher, spiritual things in life are portrayed in the things of nature and life. Thus, the truths of God's Word are like seeds planted in the soil of our minds, and we become spiritually fruitful when we practice spiritual truths from love, making us fruitful and sweet and beautiful, like apple trees. Then our fruitfulness spreads more seeds, and the garden of heaven on earth spreads.
- And so, rather than portraying God as an angry Being waiting to pour out wrath on depraved sinners, Johnny's faith taught him that God's truth is like seeds from Heaven, which when planted in the good soil of a good and loving heart, sprout and enlighten people into wise and compassionate ways of living and treating one another.

In Swedenborg's vast teachings, which he claimed were the benevolent result of the Lord's Second Coming (a cosmic, spiritual advent), Johnny found deep support for it through many literal passages in the Bible, such as what we find in *Luke 6* this morning: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."

And so, as one who meditated upon and then acted upon the loving wisdom he found within the many words, stories and parables we find in God's Word, Johnny discovered early on that the joy and peace of God's Kingdom are found not by believing in a particular doctrine or creed, but by helping people with their real needs, hurts and suffering, and by helping them grow in their spiritual life and their understanding about the Lord, Heaven, and the literal and inner meaning of the Bible.

With this in his mind, Johnny went to work helping to feed and nurture the families of the pioneer wilderness. And, he helped them find love and comfort and new understanding by talking with them about Scripture and by disseminating chapters from some of Swedenborg's great books. On page 62 of Ray Silverman's fine work, *The Core of Johnny Appleseed: The Unknown Story of A Spiritual Trailblazer*, we find these most illuminating words about the core of Johnny Appleseed's life and mission:

Word of his remarkable missionary work spread quickly and even crossed the ocean. In 1817, the Manchester Society for Printing, Publishing and Circulating the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, located in England, heard about what was happening. In response, they issued a statement about Johnny's efforts to promote what they called the Church of the New Jerusalem or the New Church: there is in the western country a very extraordinary missionary of the New Jerusalem. A man has appeared who seems to be almost independent of corporal wants and sufferings. He goes barefooted, can sleep anywhere, in house or out of house, and live upon the coarsest and most scanty fare. He has actually thawed the ice with his bare feet. He procures what books he can of the New Church, travels into the remote settlements, and lends them wherever he can find readers, and sometimes divides a book into two or three parts for more extensive distribution and usefulness. This man for years past has been in the employment of bringing into cultivation, in numberless places in the wilderness, small patches (two or three acres) of ground, and then sowing apple seeds and rearing nurseries.

And then comes this arresting statement: The profits of the whole are intended for the purpose of enabling him to print all the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, and distribute them through the western settlements of the United States.

For most people, this is surprising news. It shines a new light on the story of Johnny Appleseed. He certainly played a vital role in providing seedlings for the early settlers who needed apple trees to survive, and thrive, on the *physical* frontier; but that was not his primary goal. His deeper mission was to share with them the life-giving truths that he found in Swedenborg's writings—truths that would help them survive, and thrive, on the *spiritual* frontier.

Truly, Johnny Appleseed was "an extraordinary missionary of the New Jerusalem."

Indeed, a tree is known by its fruit, and both the natural and spiritual fruit Johnny

Appleseed spread and helped develop, was both sweet and full of good nutrients, to help people grow and regenerate, and find lasting peace and happiness in God who loves us always.

Amen.

Pastoral prayer: Gracious God, I thank you so much for the wonderful and inspiring life of John Chapman, who reminds us that if we choose to be open and responsive to your Divine Love and Wisdom, everyone can make a difference in life. Help us to follow his example, by observing the real needs and challenges of our neighbors, and then respond with compassion as modern day sowers of truth. Help us to work humbly and faithfully with you, O Lord, to plant seeds of love and truth every day. Amen.