



OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

He Lived for Others: The Spirituality of Johnny Appleseed

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Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”¹

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved

In his address to the West Virginia Historical Association on April 20, 1967, Frank O. Chapman, the great-great-grandson of Nathaniel Chapman (who was the half-brother of Johnny “Appleseed” Chapman), had much to say about the “missing pieces” in Johnny’s story. His words help us decipher more of the real, historical truth about the legendary pioneer whose legacy we honor during this annual festival.

For example, Frank Chapman gives us insight into Johnny’s early years in Longmeadow. He said that even in his childhood Johnny, “loved nature and spent much time along the streams and in the woods.... Pet squirrels, rabbits, and birds fearlessly came to him at his whistle or call.”

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Information like this, handed down through shared stories within the immediate family, seems closer to the truth than fantastic accounts about rescuing mosquitoes, taming wolves, and slumbering with bears. It also helps us get a fuller portrait of who Johnny Appleseed really was—the real man behind the fiction.

Frank Chapman also spoke about how the Native Americans of Johnny’s time appreciated the character and quality of his famous relative. He said that during the time of the violent conflicts between the settlers and Native Americans, Johnny earned the respect of both the settlers and natives alike. “Johnny knew many Indian chiefs and spoke at least three of the tribal languages,” said Chapman.

In her book, *The True Story of Johnny Appleseed*, Ophia Smith shares that this altruistic American orchard man was so esteemed by the American Indians that they “looked upon him with a sort of superstitious awe and considered him a great medicine man.”³ They referred to him as a white man “touched by the Great Spirit.”

Other unforgettable accounts about how Johnny treated both the American soldiers and

² Chapman, Frank. *John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed)*. Presentation given to the West Virginia Historical Association, Brooke County, April 20, 1967. <http://wcbd.hypermart.net/applecrest/johnny1.html>.

³ Smith, Ophia D. *The True Story of Johnny Appleseed*. West Chester: Chrysalis Books, 2007.

the Indians in the middle of their battles reveal the true spirituality of this man, whose compassion for all shows us that Johnny chose authentically to live out the spirit of Christianity as revealed in the way that Christ loved everyone as family. Or as our New Testament lesson puts it this morning, that our Lord taught His disciples saying, “whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many..” (Mark 10:43-45)

One of my favorite examples of eye-witnesses who observed John Chapman’s real character in the midst of the battles between Indians and Colonial soldiers says that rather than running for cover when a deadly battle unfolded where Johnny was living, he chose instead to act as a pioneer medic, and give medical attention to the men on both sides, living out the spirit of the Good Samaritan, which Christ instilled into the heart of our world long ago, when the Lord spoke His parables to those willing to listen.

For me as a modern-day Swedenborgian Christian, the core reason I enjoy participating in this annual festival honoring John Chapman’s life and legacy is simply because he is much more to me than a folk hero. The real man who eventually became known as Johnny Appleseed, is one of my real spiritual heroes. He shows me, just like St. Francis of Assisi or Florence Nightingale did in their places and times, that the living, moving, life-empowering Spirit of God, who is Divine Love and Wisdom Itself, is fully capable of flowing into MY OWN HEART AND MIND, RIGHT NOW TODAY, just as God did back then when Johnny was brilliantly and lovingly doing his own ministry when our pioneer ancestors worked so hard to survive and live during years of great struggle and challenge.

You see, Johnny “Appleseed” Chapman was among many back in the late 1700s in America who providentially came across the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, and who studied them and applied them to his life. His efforts as an evangelist, though, were extraordinary, as he gave chapters of this fine theology out to the pioneer families whom he often visited.

Swedenborg was an 18th century Swedish scientist, inventor and Christian whose special way of reading and interpreting the Bible helped people to discover the truth about the eternal nature of God. Rather than only reading the Scriptures in a literalistic way, Swedenborg learned that underneath the surface level of God’s Word, which in places depicts God as being angry and wrathful, there is revealed the constant, unchanging nature of a Divine Being who is pure Love, goodness, mercy and wisdom. And this is why in the life and person of Jesus Christ, who was the incarnation of God-living-among-us 2016 years ago, in Him we see visibly the warmth, truth and goodness of God who calls us all to live out the literal and inner meaning of the Ten Commandments, which God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

In Swedenborg’s writings, and how they help us to unlock the sacred, inner meaning of God’s Holy Word, Johnny Appleseed heard a message of love, mercy and compassion for all living things that resonated with his universal love of all people, which led him to strategize his business of planting huge apple orchards, which served as nutrition for many malnourished American pioneers when the colonial settlers traveled west through Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana as our ancestors spread westward in the early 1800s long ago.

I myself have been reading the books that Emanuel Swedenborg wrote since I was a teenager, as well as the many divinely inspired books of God’s Holy Word, and in this great pairing of spiritual resources, just like Johnny Appleseed did in his lifetime, I have found a great inheritance of peaceful wisdom from the Lord, which calls me to live a life of peaceful, humble servanthood, yet which also leaves me totally free to turn away from God if I desire, living selfishly only for myself. One of the many enlightening passages out of Swedenborg’s writings that illustrate what I mean is found in a chapter within one of his books titled *True Christianity*, that has the chapter heading called “All Individual Members of Humankind Are The Neighbor We Are To Love,” has this to say:

“We are not born for our own sake; we are born for the sake of others. That

is, we are not born to live for ourselves alone; we are born to live for others.” (n. 406)⁴

We can easily hear this echoing the eternal wisdom given to us by the Lord who said, “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

I love the many books and stories about John Chapman because they tell us of a real-life man who chose to live very simply off the land, who especially loved the company of families and children, who was not concerned about wearing the latest fashions, but who instead discovered that love and faith in action bring us joys overflowing as we grow in God’s Spirit. John Chapman learned that deep pleasure and fullness of life was his “treasure hidden in a field” by figuring out how he could carefully stay three steps ahead of the poor yet adventurous pioneer families moving westward. Using sacks of appleseeds he procured from cider mills and other means, he planted apple orchards that would provide the settlers a nutritious food source to get them through the cold winters of Midwest America.

It does my heart good to read biographies and stories about Johnny, who not only went out of his way to help wounded horses get nursed back to health, but who also worked very intelligently and prudently to earn a living off of his apple orchard sales and bartering the lands he cultivated, to help God provide those pioneer families who needed encouragement, to discover and read and learn about a form of Christianity known as the Lord’s New Christian faith. This wonderful vision of Christianity teaches that God is not angry, punishing and wrathful, but is indeed an eternal being abounding in steadfast love and wisdom, Who loves giving us the inspiration and empowerment we need to live primarily for God, “born to live for others,” rather than for ourselves alone.

Indeed, part of what we inherit within the natural degree of our will and thinking, are tempting and seemingly pleasurable ways of living, that run counter to what the Lord tries

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

diligently to help us receive as His finite children. It is easy to look within ourselves and see and feel the baggage of self-centeredness and hard-heartedness passed down from very ancient times when people living before recorded history began choosing self-alone rather than serving a God of pure goodness. We see this illustrated in many stories about Christ's own disciples, who in our story for worship this morning were asking Jesus to grant them the favor of putting them at the right and left hand of God after death.

Jesus responds and reminds them that in order for anyone to have the joy of living so close with the Lord in life-eternal in the Kingdom of Heaven, it takes much more than simply saying with my lips that I believe in Jesus as my Savior. As with many passages in the Bible we learn that this inheritance requires me to be baptized with the living fire of God's Love in my heart, by choosing to serve others more than myself, and to drink the cup of willing sacrifice and servanthood over being mostly concerned with my own status, wealth and prosperity. Jesus said, "These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

True greatness, we hear, is attained by not wanting to lord our own status and power over others, wanting others to serve my every whim. But instead wanting more to follow in the footsteps of our spiritual heroes like Jesus, St. Francis, Johnny Appleseed or perhaps people of your own family, who gave you real examples of what it means to put love first in life, rather than serving self-alone instead.

As our Savior and Redeemer said so wonderfully, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Johnny Appleseed lived a genuine life of caring for all people, for mother Earth and for creatures big and small. No wonder those who knew and loved him wanted to remember his legacy by putting on his mock gravestone up on that hill, "He lived for others." Shall we try to do the same with the blessings God gives to us every day? My answer is, yes.

Amen