

Apples Of God's Eye
Commentary on Stewardship
October 14, 2012

I.

I mentioned earlier that next Sunday will be our annual "fall-clean up." We will clean up our buildings and grounds because we want to be good stewards of what we have at St. Thomas.

Today, we also talk about stewardship. It is that time of the year. Perhaps some of you might think of stewardship as another type of fall clean-up.

And I would say right at the beginning, for those here for the first time today, please don't get the wrong idea. We don't always talk about money. But sometimes it's appropriate because giving to God is an important spiritual practice in our lives, and in the life of the church.

I thought for a long time about what I should say this morning. I know that stewardship sermons can seem repetitive. Some people would prefer to turn in their pledge cards without any sermons, or brochures, or letters about it.

There is a story about a young child who noisily started running up and down the aisle in church during the sermon. The Priest stopped preaching and said, "Johnny, you must be quiet during the sermon. People are trying to sleep!"

I hope that you all to resist that temptation today even you have heard some of this before. I am sure that many of you already know and understand the reasons why stewardship is important. But it is useful to review it one more time each year.

II.

And today I would like to introduce our call to stewardship with a story about myself. I have a moderately famous ancestor. His given name was Jonathan Chapman, but he was more commonly known as Johnny Appleseed. He lived about two hundred years ago.

Johnny was a real person; not just a Disney story. He traveled around Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana planting apple orchards. He was part of our Ohio history course in elementary school.

And to be entirely accurate, my family's line of descent is from one of Johnny's brothers who came west with him from Massachusetts. Johnny himself never married and had no children. My maternal grandmother was the last descendant in that line born with the name, Chapman.

And the legends handed down in our family through the generations suggest that Johnny was an unusual character. My grandfather used to say that his barrel was a couple of apples short. He wore scraggly clothes, such as a feed sack with holes cut in it, went barefoot most of the time, and the story goes that he wore a tin pot as a hat because he also could use it for cooking.

But here is the reason for Johnny's notoriety. He first worked in an orchard in Pennsylvania, and became quite knowledgeable about apples. Then he went west to Ohio, and began planting apple orchards on other people's property at no charge. Sometimes he asked for permission and sometimes he did not. He had a thing for apples, and just wanted to offer a gift to others.

And here's one more part of the legend. He planted apples from seeds, which meant that the apples the tree eventually produced would be quite sour. Apparently you have to graft branches together to get sweeter apples. But there was a benefit. Sour apples were the best for making hard cider, and so Johnny also contributed a drink of choice to our early pioneers.

III.

So what does all this have to do with stewardship? Johnny wanted to freely give something to others. For him, it was apples. He believed that apples were good things, and he wanted everyone to have them.

And there is a biblical basis for praising apples, at least metaphorically. In the Psalms the writer asks God to "Guard me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings (17:8)." Just as Johnny Appleseed cared for other people in his own special and unique way, we can recognize how God cares for us in all possible ways.

God cares for us because he created us. Our very lives were given to us by God. And from the moment we were born our lives unfolded as we began to use the gifts, skills, and abilities that our creator imparted to us.

And, of course, our own efforts were part of it. Perhaps in conversations with each other we can take some credit for our hard work. The old Frank Sinatra song says, "I did it my way," and we might think we have done the same.

But while we might say that as we swap stories with each other, we cannot say "I did it my way" to God. God already knows that all the good we ever have done or might do flows from the blessings he has given us.

God gave us our families. God gave us the energy and ambition and skill to do all that work that made us successful and able to care for our loved ones. If we made good decisions that led to success it was because God gave us the judgment and discretion to do so. These all are gifts from God.

And sometimes perhaps the ball bounced our way. We had a break or two. Those also were blessings from God. God helped us along the way even though it might not be readily apparent. Everything in our lives a blessing from God even though we also played a part.

IV.

How do we respond to what God has done? In First John, the disciple said, "We love because he first loved us" (4:19). We love because he first loved us. God gave us everything, and we are called to give back to him.

Just before communion every Sunday, after the ushers bring the offertory to the altar, I raise the alms basins and quote from Scripture. It will happen in a few minutes. I say, "All things come of thee O Lord," and you all respond, "And of thine own have we given thee (1 Ch. 29:14)." That is the basis for our stewardship theme this year. Of thine own we give.

And this confirms that everything we give to the church belongs to God anyway. In the context of the world we, of course, own our things. The law encourages and protects property ownership. But God's perspective is different. We cannot assert our ownership claims to him. We can't say, "Sorry God, this is mine." We are just using what he in his grace gives us to use.

So, how do we decide on our stewardship? I truly believe that we begin with prayer. "Help me, Lord, to do what is right here." The Lord will bless and honor a prayerful decision.

And the biblical standard is ten percent. It began with Abraham in the Book of Genesis (14:20), it continued in the law God gave Moses on Mt Sinai (Lev. 27:32), it was recognized in the Gospels (Lk. 18:12), and remembered again in the Book of Hebrews (7:4). In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and from the beginning we have been called to give a tenth.

But sometimes God cuts us some slack if we are overburdened. That also is a blessing from God's grace. As a result, in the contemporary church if a tithe of ten percent is truly beyond our reach, the church asks us to prayerfully determine a lower percentage that we can give.

The point is that we decide something in a righteous way. And it should not be a process of elimination of all other expenses before we come to the church. We give to God first, not last; we give to God what is right, not what is left.

I also would say this as we decide our pledges. If we find ourselves arguing with ourselves, or trying to rationalize our stewardship decision, then it might not be what God wants and we might consider praying some more. We usually can find some way to convince ourselves of whatever we want to be right, but God knows what actually is right, and that's what counts.

There is one last matter. There seems to be uncertainty about whether giving to charity is the same thing as giving to the church. It is not the same thing. The Bible speaks of giving to God. And the Bible also calls us to help the needy. But the latter is not an alternative to the former. We give God the full share no matter what else we might do.

As a result, giving to charity, commendable though it is, does not replace giving to God. Our Christian duty is to do the best we can for the church first. Then we are free to support secular charities, or college alumni organizations, or whatever else we want. But the church comes first because God comes first.

V.

The phrase "thank you" frequently is used at the end of something. We say "thank you" as we leave someone's home, or after someone does something for us. Something is completed, and we express our appreciation.

It is slightly different as we live the spiritual discipline of stewardship. Of course, when we return a portion of God's blessings to him, we are indeed saying "thank you." But we do not do it as the end of anything. Rather we offer a continuing "thank you" as we recognize the source of our blessings every day.

We are the apple of God's eye, and just as my ancestor, Johnny Appleseed, wanted to bless people with his work, so also God wants to bless us for our stewardship.

Before closing, I would like to repeat what I said earlier about Bishop Gray's visit with us this Wednesday at 6:00 pm. Please try to be here on Wednesday, enjoy our potluck, and hear what the Bishop has to say. Among other things he will talk about stewardship, and I know you will hear his words as blessings, not burdens.

That's because faithful stewardship is uplifting. And I pray that we all may be led to a faithful expression of thanksgiving for our gifts from God, and that through the gifts we offer in return we ourselves will be blessed. *Amen.*