

“On Being Stewards of the Word”

Richard C. Allen
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I have a mental picture of Johnny Apple Seed starting out from his home in Leominster, Massachusetts and heading west to plant apple seeds. I picture him on a mission. I think of him as driven, as if for him there is no turning back, no such thing as NOT planting the apple seeds he has been given. Johnny Apple Seed, born John Chapman, considers himself a steward, as one responsible for the spread of the Red Delicious and the McIntosh and the Mcoons. Hold onto that image of Johnny Apple Seed the good steward of apples.

Jesus is walking along a rural farm road with his disciples. He wants them to think of themselves as stewards of God’s Word, as people who have been entrusted to receive and to nurture and to keep alive the stories of God’s redeeming love. He sees that if the disciples don’t act as stewards of the sacred stories, then who will?

They come to a cultivated acre and Jesus can not pass up an opportunity for a parable. A sower went out to sow some seed. You know the story. Some seed falls on the hard path, some among thorns, some where the tall weeds grow. These seeds haven’t got a chance! But some of the seeds land in loam. They sprout right up and produce bushels of grain!

So that the disciples won’t miss the point, Jesus quickly invites the disciples to be like the loam, the good soil that receives and nurtures the seeds which, of course, are the Word of God. So, here, we have a text inviting us to be responsible keepers of the sacred stories. You and I are called to be stewards of the Word! In our Protestant tradition, it is not the ordained few who are the designated stewards. The responsibility falls to everyone!

A church that is a steward of the Word is a church alive! A church that is a steward of the Word is a church that has no financial worries. A church that is a steward of the Word is a church with a huge parking problem!

For me, being a steward of the Word begins with knowing the Word; that is, knowing the themes and the characters and the stories of Scripture; to know them as well as we know the Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes or as well as we know Aesop's Fables or at least as well as we know the starting line-up of the Yankees or the Red Sox or even the Detroit Tigers!

One of the high moments of this past summer came during Jonathan Drury's ecclesiastical council. He had presented his ordination paper and was responding to tough theological questions. The moderator asked if there were any more questions. I raised my hand. I asked Jonathan if he would tell us a Bible story. Without missing a beat, he proceeded to tell the story of the prodigal son in his own modern language, in language that revealed the powerful truth of that parable. I sat there beaming, realizing how he has become a steward of the Word. He knows the story! I was wishing everyone under 21 years of age had been there.

For me, being a steward of the Word continues beyond knowing the sacred stories to actually living the stories. Knowing the Word is never enough. It's in living the Word that joy abounds and that hope thrives and that peace has a chance.

Many people have brought to my attention the extraordinary events happening around the killing of the Amish school girls in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. That community has rallied as you might expect. But they have done more than rally around the families of the victims. They have also rallied around the family of the one who inflicted all the violence. Forgiveness has been flowing like sap from maple trees in springtime. After the funeral for the gunman, the families of the slain girls hosted a meal for that man's family and friends. I tell you, these are true stewards of the word. They know the sacred stories about forgiveness. They know the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers who threw him into a pit and sold him into slavery. They know the story of Jesus forgiving the one caught in adultery when others were about to stone her to death. They know the story of Jesus telling Peter he must forgive seventy times seven times!

But these Amish neighbors have gone beyond knowing the Word to living the Word, beyond knowing about forgiveness to actually forgiving in a real life drama. By living the Word, they have borne witness to the power of the Word.

I have been reading the autobiographical book, Growing Up, by Russell Baker. In his childhood, he went to church every Sunday with his mother. Together, they listened to the sacred stories of Jesus and his love, the sacred stories of loving the neighbor as the self, the sacred stories of God's creation and how God names each creature as good. But, later on, at home, Monday through Saturday, Russell Baker would hear his mother referring to their Italian neighbors as wops and their Black neighbors as something less than sacred. For him, there was this disconnect. His mother knew her stories but she wasn't living those stories. To this day, he finds it hard to go to church. To be a steward of the word is to know the Biblical narratives and to live them day by day.

At South Congregational Church, we see the evidence of people living the Word. We have some really good stewards around here. I wish Russell Baker would pop in for a few weeks and gain some alternative role models.

One of the Biblical themes that surfaces in all sixty six books is the idea of justice. Justice in the Biblical sense has to do with providing access to the basics of life, such as nutritional food. One is said to suffer an injustice when there is no access to wholesome food. The Book of Ruth, in particular, lifts up this theme. In Ruth's story we find that farmers made a point of leaving some of their crop in the field. The landless poor were then welcomed to come with bushel baskets to harvest the grain that had been left behind. This is known as gleaning. I hope everyone at South Church knows this story. What I want to lift up is that twenty six of you have said, we know the story of Ruth; we want to live the story. So they have gone to the fields and orchards and picked corn and apples, bringing the word of justice off the page, providing the poor with access to fresh fruits and vegetables. They are being stewards of the Word.

Another Biblical theme that is woven throughout both Testaments is what I call 'making a joyful noise unto God.' Psalm 100, "make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth." Have you memorized this psalm? It was one of our first assignments in Sunday School in the 1950's. I hope everyone at South Church commits this psalm to memory. It is only five verses. What I want to lift up is that forty or fifty or sixty children and adults have said, yes, we know the psalm about making a joyful noise; we have read it many times; now we want to live it! We want to sing in the choirs! These adults come every Thursday night. These children stay after church to rehearse. They are bringing the notes off the page. They are singing their faith. They are making the kind of music that stirs the heart and wakes up the bones and kindles the spirit.

Our choir members, young and old, are modeling what it means to be a steward of the Word!

A third Scriptural theme that is shared by all the Biblical writers is the ministry of healing. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell stories of Jesus placing his hands upon the heads of lepers or the heads of the paralyzed or the heads of the mentally ill or the heads of the grievors. He lays his hands upon them, prayers over them, and they experience a kind of wholeness. I have always been moved by the account of the healing of Jairus' daughter. She appears to have breathed her last breath. The mourners have been summoned. Jesus enters the room, touches her hand and whispers, "Little girl, get up." And immediately the girl got up. Probably everyone here already knows and loves this story.

What I want to lift up is that a small group of South Church people have said, oh yes we know that story, now we want to live that story; we want to lay our hands upon those who are distressed such that the love of God can come through our fingers and make a difference. On the third Sunday night of every month, tonight included, this healing team welcomes the community to a healing service. Prayers are spoken. Music is offered. And for those who wish, the laying on of hands. These healing ministers have moved beyond knowing the Word to actually living it. They are being faithful stewards of the Word.

I've been thinking about commissioning someone to make about 1000 Johnny Apple Seed pins. Whenever somebody takes that giant step, that leap from knowing the Word to living the Word, we would snap a Johnny Apple Seed pin on their shirt or blouse. Visitors and new comers would see these apple seed pins and would have to ask what they mean. And someone would say, "At South Congregational Church, we are stewards of the word. We know our Bible stories and we live our Bible stories. Come, and join us in being stewards of the word!"

Next Sunday is Stewardship Sunday. We'll all show up with our pledge cards and place them on the communion table. It will be a sign of our stewardship of money. But for today, let us ponder this matter of being stewards of the Word. In the greatest of hope,
Amen!