

***“The Apples Beyond the Wall”***

***John 10:1-10***

***Sermon, 4/22/18***

Sometimes a story moves us in a deeply spiritual way. It can do so more than we know, especially when it comes to mind at just the right moment. The other day when the news came that Easton Acts, a combination of volunteers from Easton churches acting together, will be receiving an immigrant family for resettlement, one such story came to mind. I had it in my files for over ten years. I do not know its origin, or who wrote it, but I believe it was God-sent.

The people were on the verge of starvation. The river that flowed through their fields overflowed and destroyed their only crop. People grumbled. “If only we could have done like other villages and used the land in the hills to plant our seeds.” It was not just the stone wall that surrounded the land that kept them away. The long ago curse a dying man put upon the land frightened them. The present villagers weren’t sure how the curse originated. Still, they were afraid of the land behind the wall. If only someone could get behind the wall, they would know if the curse still held. When word of the dilemma spread, suggestions aplenty were offered. One man proposed to build a catapult, offering to be shot over the wall with a rope that would pull him back. He wanted half of their stored grain. “Too much,” said the leaders. Another offered to build a scaffold around the wall so the village leaders could peer over it. They would need to cut down all the trees in the village for the scaffolding. The village leaders were unwilling to do that. Finally, a stranger, a young man, offered to go behind the wall. He said he knew a way in and was not afraid of what he would find. Since he was not one of their own, the leaders let him take the risk. The youth went to the door in the wall, pulled out a stone, reached in and opened the door from the inside and entered. When the youth stepped out, he held what looked like a red ball. He invited the leaders to approach the door and peer in. What they saw were row upon row of trees, filled with more red balls. As they gaped in astonishment, the young man bit into his red ball and encouraged them to pick one and do the same. When they marveled at the taste of the ball, he told them that it was his ancestor who as a soldier had saved apple seeds and then planted them on his return. Not sure if the seeds would flourish on his land, he built the wall to keep the villagers from trampling them. When he and his foreign wife and child were driven out of the village because of prejudice, he took his secret with him. He had not cursed the villagers but had warned them away from his property, hoping to return someday and share his secret with them. When marauders killed him and captured his wife and child, the villagers took his words as a curse. The woman and child were rescued and settled in a distant village. The story of the apple orchard

came down to this young man. He came to see if the story of the walled in village was his family story. Being as generous, as his soldier ancestor, the young man offered to take down the wall, share the fruit of the trees and help the villagers start their own orchards. No longer completely dependent on the whims of the river, the villagers were able to trade their apples for grain. They had a new lease on life.ö

***So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.***

Did you hear the story and the scripture? We don't have to accept the gospel writer's understanding of Jesus to hear its message. Not every follower of Jesus in John's day and time saw Jesus as John did. None of our other gospel writers are so explicitly exclusive as he. But did you hear the story and the gospel?

There are walls in life. There are barriers to the abundant life, which Jesus offers. Salvation, the awareness that we belong on this earth, that we have someone to guide us on our journey, someone to show the way beyond the walls and barriers is what both the story and the scripture tell us.

Does life sometimes wall us in, do we ever think there is no way to abundant living? Are there memories that block us from fully embracing the present possibilities? Is there a barrier that keeps us from seeing the gift of life God is offering? Have we become so hardened that we cannot hear the promise?

***Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you life.*** There is certainty in the bumper sticker I saw a while back that said, "If life is not as it should be, it can be.ö

***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*** If we want, maybe we're on the wrong side of the wall.

The young man who comes to us in those places and moments where we cannot see over the wall, beyond the barriers, says "I know the way in. Come and see where the apples are. Come and eat and be satisfied.ø

***I am the gate. Whoever enters...will come in and go out and find pasture.***

Did you hear the message? We are the villagers. We have not been willing to break through the barriers. We do not know the full joy of God's orchard.

We can claim the promise, we can open the doors that appear locked. Jesus has the key to abundant living. He opens the locked doors, but we have to decide to enter. Jesus offers the way in.

***Come follow me.***

***Love God. Love your neighbor.***

How, we might ask? We are not the first to do so. But the answer is always the same.

***I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.***

***I am the gate.***

Hearing these words and acting on them, responding to the offer of abundant life means walking the way of self giving love, seeing challenges as opportunities to enter the orchard, seeing the past as over and the present as possibility, seeing the stranger as one who carries God's presence, and seeing beyond walls.

We embrace the gift of abundant living by embracing the presence of God in every other human being, living in community where there are no strangers and no barriers, simply neighbors who we love. We embrace the abundant life which remains hidden beyond the walls by opening the gate with the key of love, the love of God, the love of neighbor, the love of self. Beyond the wall, beyond the barriers of life lies a beautiful orchard, with enough for all.

Do we hear the story? Do we get the message? ***I have come so that you may have life, and have it abundantly.*** May we take the risk and go to where apples grow and where abundant life is found, to where the reality of God is revealed. It turns out to be the strangers who become sister and brother.

Have an apple anyone?