

Throughout the New Testament we observe Jesus speaking about lost items such as: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and even a lost son, who we just heard about this past Sunday. But for some reason he never talked about a lost Apple. And perhaps he should have, because apparently lost apples are hot right now, because they contain important genetic material and can be used to breed other apples. Although there were once at least 17,000 named varieties grown in America, brought here by the early colonists, today there are only about 5,000.

Yes, you heard that right. About 12,000 varieties of apples are in danger of being lost. Forever. In search of these nearly extinct apple varieties is The Lost Apple Project. According to *Modern Farmer* magazine, this nonprofit organization has found 23 lost or nearly extinct apple varieties since 2014. In particular, they seek to identify and preserve apple trees that were planted before 1920 in the Pacific Northwest.

Apparently, each apple has a unique genetic makeup, which can add to the diversity of the apple population. They can be used to breed other apples to help them grow better in various climates and conditions. “Genetic diversity is part of sustainability,” says Ben Gutierrez, the curator of the USDA’s National Apple Collection. “Each apple discovered carries a legacy, interesting genetics, and a unique story. Like people, every apple is unique.”

And I’m fairly certain Jesus would have agreed with that statement. After all, every person in this world is unique. Every person has value. And like apples, everyone is worth preserving, for the good of all. In fact, Jesus was willing to suffer death on a cross to make that a reality.

As we explore the very beginning of his ministry we witness that Jesus was a smashing success, as he traveled to Galilee and began to teach in the synagogues. Luke tells us that he was “filled with the power of the Spirit” and “was praised by

everyone.” Yes, by everyone. He was the kind of teacher that you wanted to give a big red apple to.

Then he entered his hometown of Nazareth and went to the synagogue. On the Sabbath, he read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, in particular the section that says: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... release to the captives ... recovery of sight to the blind.” After the reading, Jesus sat down. His townspeople looked at him, trying to figure him out. Then he said to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

You might say that initially, the people were impressed. Everyone said nice words about him and were amazed at his gracious speech. They asked, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” Jesus had an incredible public speaking ability for a man who was the son of a carpenter.

But Jesus wasn’t content to soak up their admiration. He knew that he needed to speak the truth, even if it was a hard truth. So, he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

Suddenly, the words of Jesus went from sweet to sour. When Jesus quoted the proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself,” the word “yourself” was probably referring to Nazareth. He expected that the people would want him, the Doctor, to heal them, the people of his hometown. He went on to predict that they would ask him to do in his hometown the great things that they had heard him do in the town of Capernaum. And he concluded by saying that they would probably reject him, because “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” So...the apple that

Jesus held up to them was not a Red Delicious. Instead, it was more of a sour green one.

Then Jesus embarked on his own Lost Apple Project, turning away from the people of Israel and looking for some valuable varieties elsewhere. “But the truth is,” he said to them, “there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.”

The people of Nazareth knew that story, but apparently weren’t big fans, they didn’t like it one bit. In a time of drought and famine, the widows of Israel were suffering terribly. But God sent the prophet Elijah to a foreign town, Zarephath in Sidon, to help a widow there. Elijah raised her son from death, inspiring her to say, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” Jesus found a lost apple called the *Widow of Zarephath* and discovered in her a powerful statement of faith.

Then Jesus said, “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” The people of Nazareth knew that story as well, and they didn’t care for it either. Naaman was a foreign army commander who followed the instructions of Elisha the prophet, and when he obeyed Elisha, he was healed of his leprosy. Jesus found a lost apple called *Naaman the Syrian*, and saw in him true obedience to a prophet of God.

Eventually, at this point, the people of the synagogue could stand no more. They were content with the 5,000 varieties of apples known to them, and these hidden varieties seemed worthless to them. Luke tells us that the people were “filled with rage” toward Jesus. “They got up, drove him out of the town, and led

him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”

It looked as though the public ministry of Jesus was going to end as quickly as it had started. But God was not finished with him. Jesus “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” Jesus walked away from Nazareth and continued his Lost Apple Project by helping a man with an unclean spirit, healing the mother-in-law of Simon, cleansing a leper, healing a paralytic, and calling a tax collector named Levi to follow him. Jesus believed that every person was unique, every person was valuable, and every person was worth preserving, for the good of all. Even nearly extinct varieties such as the *Widow of Zarephath* and *Naaman the Syrian*.

Now if you find yourself wondering about how central this project was to the ministry of Jesus, just fast-forward to the 19th chapter of the gospel of Luke. There, he is passing through Jericho and sees a tax collector named Zacchaeus, up in a tree. After inviting himself to stay at the house of a sour apple named Zacchaeus, Jesus says, “the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

That’s the Lost Apple Project, according to Jesus: “to seek out and to save the lost.” He knew that there was valuable material in Zacchaeus that needed to be found and preserved. And his story has continued to build up the Christian community since the day it was first told by Luke. Which begs the question, so, who are the apples that need to be found and preserved, for the good of all?

First perhaps we should start with ourselves. If you are feeling like you are up in a tree, stressed or distressed as you face a difficult situation, let Jesus find you. He wants to touch you, forgive you, heal you, and guide you. To be lost does not mean that you are doomed; it simply means that you are in the wrong place. You are not beyond his reach, and he truly wants you to be part of his beloved community.

Next, look around yourself. Who is the *Widow of Zarephath* who needs your attention? There are so many people around us who are living in loneliness and isolation, ready to give up as they face the challenges of the day. Be the hands of Jesus to them and offer them your assistance. Be the heart of Jesus for them and show them the unconditional love of God. And don't hesitate to tell them about the Christian faith that motivates you.

Finally, widen your vision and look for the power of God to be at work in surprising places. Expect to see *Naaman the Syrian* healed, even though he may be living beyond the borders of our church, our community, or our nation. Perhaps it would do us well to find an opportunity to partner with another church, or with a congregation of another faith, to feed the hungry or shelter the homeless. We should all be willing to work with people of other faiths — or with people of no faith, or with the people on the margins — to make our community a better place. After all we must never forget that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He wants to preserve everyone, for the good of all. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.