

THE FIZZLED FIG TREE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, March 18, 2018
based on Luke 13:6–9; Mark 11:12–24***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Journey to Jerusalem.” We have been journeying with Jesus from the start of his public ministry, when he called his disciples, through his early preaching, a number of his miracles, and his Transfiguration; and now we are approaching Jerusalem. Our worship will continue the journey with Palm Sunday next Sunday, then the crucifixion story in our Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, and the series will conclude on Easter. Let us be in a moment of prayer . . .

It is as we arrive at Jerusalem that we encounter what is perhaps the strangest story in the gospels, as Jesus beats up a fig tree. Jesus and the disciples were staying just outside of Jerusalem in the small town of Bethany. On their way into the city, Jesus was hungry; and in the distance he saw a fig tree in leaf. He went to see if it had any figs on it. *[When they came from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it Mark 11:12-13a.]* But it did not, because, Mark tells us, it was not the season for figs. *[When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. Mark 11:13b]* Jesus thereupon cursed the fig tree, saying, *May no one ever eat fruit from you again!* *[Jesus said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it. Mark 11:14]* This is followed by the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, and he and the disciples then returned to Bethany for the evening. The next morning, as they came into Jerusalem again, the fig tree was withered away to its roots. *[In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Mark 11:20]*

What is going on here? Jesus appears to be taking out his frustrations on a helpless fig tree. But of course there is much more going on there than what first meets the eye.

In the previous sermon in this series, we considered a nature miracle which Jesus performed at the very start of his public ministry. A nature miracle is one where Jesus demonstrates power over elements in the natural world. In that case, Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast. He did so not just to keep the party going. The gospel of John tells us that “this was the first of Jesus’ signs” (John 2:11); and we noted that all of Jesus’ miracles are signs—they are designed to show us spiritual truths about ourselves or about God or how Christ can be at work. The changing of the water into wine, at the outset of Jesus’ journey in ministry, was a sign of how Jesus would bring about transformation in human lives.

Now, at the end of Jesus’ earthly journey, he does another nature miracle as he causes a fruitless fig tree to wither. Once again, it is a sign.

To understand the sign, it is helpful to know something about fig trees, particularly the kind that are native to Palestine. In late March in Israel, near the day of Passover, leaves are growing on the fig trees, and along with the leaves there are small knobs that are now called *taqsh* in Levantine Arabic. They are a kind of precursor to the real figs which will come some weeks later; they grow on the old wood of the tree, whereas the real figs will grow on new shoots. The *taqsh* remain small, about the size of a small cherry, and then fall off the tree. They are edible but not tasty, and so in Israel they would only have been eaten by the someone who was both poor and hungry.

When Jesus saw a fig tree around Passover, he knew it would not have any real fig crop on it, since, as Mark observed, it was not the season for figs. [*It was not the season for figs. Mark 11:13*] But since the tree was in leaf, there should have been some of these *taqsh*, which though small and unpalatable would nevertheless have satiated his hunger. But when he arrived at the tree, it had nothing. [*Jesus found nothing but leaves. Mark 11:13*]

It is the characteristic of fig trees in Palestine that if there are no *taqsh* on a tree in the spring, there will also be no real figs later. This tree was not going to bear fruit at all.

The tree thus relates to the parable that we heard in our other Scripture reading this morning. In the parable, Jesus told about a man who planted a fig tree. [*A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. Luke 13:6*] Year after year he came to the tree seeking fruit, but he never found anything. Finally he told his gardener to cut the tree down. [*He said to the gardener, "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil" Luke 13:7*] But the gardener said, "Give me one more year to put some fertilizer around it, and if it still doesn't bear fruit, then cut it down." [*He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." Luke 13:8-9*]

Jesus often used the image of bearing fruit as a picture of producing good in the world. In the sermon on the mount, he said, "You will know them by their fruits," (Matthew 7:20) indicating that if a person has authentic faith in God, it will result in visible good deeds. In John chapter 15, he said to his disciples, "In this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit." (John 15:8) And again he charged them, "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." (John 15:16)

In short, God's people have a calling to do good, make a positive impact on the world. But what if people are not producing fruit? This is the issue addressed by Jesus in the parable of the barren fig tree. The fig tree, because it was not bearing fruit, deserved to be cut down; but the parable finally is a picture of patience and second chances—for although the fig tree had not been bearing fruit year after year, the gardener said, "Let me work with it some more." God, like the gardener, does not give up on us, even if we are not fulfilling our calling, but continues to work to nurture us, to enable us finally to bear fruit.

In a sense, this parable pictures the whole Biblical story. The people of Israel had often failed to really bear fruit, but God kept working with them, never giving up on them,

but nurturing them with grace. Eventually, however, any farmer with an unproductive fig tree will finally cut the tree down, in order to plant a new tree that actually does bear fruit. This brings us to the fig tree that was on the road into Jerusalem.

The story of this fig tree brackets one of the most dramatic moments on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, when he cleansed the temple—overturning the tables of the moneychangers. [*Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. Mark 11:15*] The moneychangers were a corrupt operation within the temple itself. The temple was the destination of Jewish pilgrims coming from all across the empire and beyond. When these pilgrims arrived, they needed to make a contribution to the temple, called the temple tax, and they wanted to make sacrifices to fulfill the obligations of Jewish laws. The high priest specified that the temple tax had to be paid in shekels, not in pagan currency. So pilgrims needed to change their money into shekels, and they also needed to buy the sacrifices they wanted to make, especially doves. That's what the traders were doing in the temple—changing money, and selling sacrificial doves. The problem was that they were exploiting people, charging unfair rates to take advantage of these tourists. The high priest got a kickback from the whole operation. Jesus was furious that the temple was being turned thereby into an exploitative moneymaking operation, and it is for this reason that he called them "robbers." [*Jesus said, "You have made this a den of robbers." Mark 11:17*] The modern day parallel to the moneychangers is thus not a group of Girl Scouts selling Girl Scout cookies in the atrium (as is happening this morning), or a group of church volunteers running a Trash and Treasure Sale, because in such cases people are not exploiting others but quite to the contrary are giving of their time and effort to do some good in the world. The modern day parallel to the moneychangers is whenever people give lip service to God but devote themselves primarily to using others and enriching themselves.

The condition of the temple revealed the spiritual poverty of the leadership in Israel at the time. Here then is where the fig tree comes in. Jesus used this fig tree as a symbol of the barren spiritual condition of Israel's leaders. They were called to bear fruit, but they were not fulfilling their calling. When Jesus made the fig tree wither, it was a sign of how Israel was withering spiritually; and when Jesus made the statement, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (Mark 11:14), it was finally a prophetic statement about how the temple leadership would soon be destroyed in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and people would never again draw spiritual nourishment from them.

The image of the fig tree, however, applies not only to the Jewish temple leadership in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago but remains a powerful symbol for us as well. The image says that we are here for a purpose. The purpose of a fig tree is to bear figs; if it is not bearing figs, it is not becoming what it was created to be. We are here to bear spiritual fruit, to become a part of the work of God's kingdom.

One of the very interesting things to note in this story is that the tree did not actually do anything wrong. The tree did not hurt anybody, it was not causing any trouble, it was just minding its own business by the road. The tree is thus an excellent symbol of the typical approach that many people today want to take toward the issue of living a good life. If you ask the average person on the street, Are you living a good life? you will often get the answer, "Well, yes; I don't hurt other people, I don't break the law, I don't do anything really wrong." The fig tree did not do anything wrong. The problem with the fig tree was that it could have been doing something wonderful. It could have been bearing figs! God has created us such that we can be doing something truly good, sharing the love of God, touching others with the good news of Jesus Christ.

But then the further question arises as to how we can come to truly be able to bear fruit in our lives. Some of us may feel that we have little fruit to bear, little to offer. When the disciples were staring at the withered fig tree by the road, Jesus said to them, "Have faith in God." [*Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God."* Mark 11:22] Here Jesus was not saying, Have faith in God so that you can zap a fig tree too. He was saying, Have faith in God, so that you will be able to bear fruit, and be different from this fig tree! In other words, it is the Spirit of God that enables us to reach our spiritual potential and to truly bear fruit. As Paul later said, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22) Along this line, as Jesus talked about placing faith in God, he made a striking statement when He said, "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and cast into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him." (Mark 11:23)

Sometimes people have taken this to mean that if you just believe hard enough that something will take place, it will happen because you believed without doubting. But Jesus is not saying that believing real hard makes things happen in our lives. God makes things happen in our lives; our faith is not a power in itself but opens us up to the power of God. Jesus is saying, Believe that God can work a transformation in your life. Believe that God can move mountains, not simply physical mountains, but mountains of difficulty and despair. Believe that God can lead you and me to become the people God created us to be.

Jesus had begun his earthly ministry with a sign of his transforming power. Now he concludes his earthly ministry with a sign of our calling in the world. The fizzled fig tree indicated that the era of the temple leadership was coming to an end; but this did not mean that God was giving up on humanity. Now we all have a calling to be a tree that bears fruit. We can fulfill that calling as we open ourselves in faith to how the Lord will work through us, and we can share together in bearing fruit for God's Kingdom.