

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

Hespeler, December 3, 2023 © Scott McAndless – First Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 64:1-9, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37

There is a famous, some would say infamous, story in the eleventh chapter of Gospel of Mark. Jesus is out walking with his disciples one day when he sees a fig tree in the distance. The tree has lots of leaves on it so he goes over to see it, thinking that perhaps it might have some figs.

But it is only springtime, not yet the season for figs, and so of course there aren't any figs, only leaves. This is when the story goes off the rails. Jesus doesn't react like a normal person and say, "Oh well, I guess its just too early for figs." No, Jesus becomes enraged at the tree for failing to produce fruit out of season. He curses it saying, **"May no one ever eat fruit from you again."**

A Serious Curse

But it is not that Jesus – obviously a bit cranky because he didn't get any breakfast – utters a lighthearted curse. No, he is apparently deadly serious. When, the next day, the disciples pass by the same spot they are shocked to discover that the poor fig tree, that only acted according to its nature, has withered away to the roots. It will indeed never bear any fruit again.

It is the kind of bizarre story that, if someone came up to you and told you it was in the Bible, you might not believe them. But the problem is really only there when you pull the story out of its context. When you look at everything that is going on around it, you realize that there is more to this odd little tale than what you see at first.

A Symbol

The fig tree, you see, is not just a fig tree. It is a symbol. In the Bible, a fig tree is used as a symbol of the people and the nation of Israel. The Prophet Jeremiah specifically says, for example, that the people of Israel are like a fig tree that produces no figs. (Jeremiah 8:13) So, what Jesus does is meant to be a reference to passages like that.

What's more, between the time that Jesus curses the fig tree and when it withers, what does he do? He goes into the temple in Jerusalem and cleanses it of all the money changers and sellers. He essentially shuts the place down which suggests that the unfruitful tree is symbolic of the unfruitfulness of the temple, the central institution of Judean society, and its failure to care for the needs of the people.

A Few Days Later

Well, a few days after all that happened, we are told that Jesus was sitting around and shooting the breeze with the disciples on the Mount of Olives. And he began to talk to them about the things that would happen in the future.



A lot of what he was saying was kind of disturbing and frightening. He spoke about the temple being destroyed and really horrible events like the sun going dark and the stars all falling out of the sky. I don't think that it was all meant to lay out a perfect roadmap of exactly what would happen so much as he was just warning them that there were a lot of troubles ahead.

A Callback

But then Jesus said something that I find really interesting, because it seems to be a callback to the whole fig tree incident of a few days before. **“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”**

I mean, would you say that if you had done what Jesus did? It could be a kind of embarrassing reminder. “Hey guys remember how the other day I made that stupid mistake? How I thought that, because a fig tree had leaves, it was autumn and it would have fruit, but I was wrong, and the leaves meant that summer was coming? Yeah, don't do that!” I mean, that is essentially what he is saying.

But (as much as I am certain that Jesus had a good sense of humour) I don't think that he is saying any of this to make fun of himself. I think that it is a confirmation that the whole fig tree incident was an intentional object lesson. He calls it back because he wants to bring the lesson home.

What is the Lesson?

And what is the lesson of the fig tree? If the figless fig tree represents the failure of the temple to respond to the needs of the people, then it is a very discouraging image. It represents the failure of the central institution of that society to do what it was created to do. That is potentially catastrophic. A society whose institutions have failed is usually on the brink of utter collapse – which is, of course, the very thing that Jesus is talking about in this passage.

What's more, it is a kind of discouragement that we can all sympathize with. We seem to be living in an age where institution after institution is failing to live up to its promise. These institutional failures are causing many of the crises that are overtaking us.

The Housing Market

Take, for example, the institution of real estate in our country. It was an entire system that was set up to provide people with places to live near where they could work and companies space to flourish. But have you noticed how it doesn't really fulfill that purpose anymore?

More than anything else, it has become a vehicle for investment, profit and speculation. Those things were always part of it, of course, but they have taken on such a central role that it can no longer fulfill that original mandate. That is one big reason why we are dealing with a housing crisis.

So far has it strayed from its original purpose that we have seen a government thinking that the only way that they could do anything about the housing crisis was by giving environmentally protected lands, far from anywhere, to developers who would build mansions to sell for millions to people who can only drive fancy cars to work.

I can see how such a move would have juiced all kinds of profits and rewarded the speculation of the developers, but I fail to see how it could have done much to help any of the people who can't afford housing now. But that is where we seem to be now, so much has the system failed that we can't even imagine how it could work for its original purpose anymore.

I believe that that was the kind of thing that Jesus was pointing to when he pointed out that the temple was bearing no fruit. And it is not the only institution that is failing our society today.

Other Failing Institutions

Institutions of higher education are failing to yield the fruit they were created to produce. They were supposed to set students up with the knowledge and tools they need to find stable and meaningful employment. Increasingly all that they are setting students up for is life-long debt and jumping from one gig job to another just trying to survive.

And, if that were not enough, these universities and colleges are increasingly dedicating their resources to bringing in international students, taking all of their money and offering them little more than a substandard education and the vague hope that they might be able to become citizens. I'm sorry to have to tell you these things, but that fig tree is no longer producing its fruit.

And can we talk about how seniors' residences, these institutions that were supposed to offer people the possibility of aging with dignity becoming increasingly institutions whose goal it is to suck up all of their residents' assets before they die? Can we talk about how government becomes less and less about creating policies that actually help people and more and more about dueling personalities?

Jesus Would Criticize

I suspect that, if Jesus were among us today, he would look one-by-one at the various institutions of society – churches, policing, drug companies, journalism – and he would point out all of the ways in which they have become corrupted by the selfish, hateful and cynical spirit of our age and are no longer bearing the fruit that they are supposed to. He would point out that that is exactly what is making our times so miserable.

I know I am being blunt, but I do think that if Jesus was that hard on the fig tree that was the temple, he would be just as hard on our institutions.

None of that should reflect negatively on individuals within those institutions. Many, if not most, are good people just trying to do their best. Just as there were, no doubt good priests in the temple who cared about the people, there are lots of good congregations, good journalists and politicians, good cops and developers who do their best to help. But, when the institutions themselves have lost their orientation towards what matters, sometimes even the efforts of the best people can come to nothing.

A Positive Lesson

I realize that all of this might sound rather discouraging, and the fact of the matter is that we do seem to be living in discouraging times right now. But I want you to stick with me a moment here because this is actually not a discouraging verse in the Gospel of Mark.

When Jesus reminds his disciples of the lesson of the fig tree that is producing lots of leaves but no fruit, he is actually encouraging them. Yes, he is saying that the institutions of our society are collapsing because they are not producing their intended fruit, but there is still hope. The leaves are a sign. They are not a sign that fruit is present. Jesus doesn't want us to make the same mistake that he did. But they are a sign of the coming summer.

He is Near

And so Jesus says, **"When you see these things taking place,"** when you see your institutions failing, **"you know that he is near, at the very gates."** What does that mean? It means that, when our society fails, that is when God steps in. And, yes, ultimately in this passage that is imagined in terms of Christ returning and such apocalyptic signs as the sun going dark and stars falling from the sky. But, at the same time, the message also has to be that we don't have to wait for that ultimate resolution to see the action of God and the rebirth of hope.

Jesus promised the disciples, after all, that **"this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."** And, while some of it did happen in their lifespans, it certainly didn't all come to pass.

Nevertheless, the promise he was giving was real. Though the unfruitful temple may be razed to the ground – and, as Jesus promised, that did happen in 70 AD – you don't need to lose hope. In the same way, Jesus would say to us today, though all of the institutions of your society may fail, do not despair because God will not abandon you.

Active Waiting

And I don't believe that we will have to wait until the Son of Man comes in clouds with great power and glory to experience that hope. God is already at work to create hope for our society even as our traditional institutions fail.

I see some of that in our community. I see it in a project at the Legion to actually go ahead and build affordable housing. I see it in new efforts being put forth in the city to prevent people from being evicted. I see people coming forward with creative ideas to reinvent these institutions even as they fail.

I do believe that God is in all such efforts and always has been. When our human institutions fail, God will always appoint people here and there to create renewal and possibility. Maybe God is doing that work in you even now.

We should not close our eyes to the problems that plague our society. We should not try to pretend that they are not there. But, at the same time, we must not lose hope when we don't see the fruit that is needed. The leaves mean that the summer is coming. The promise of warmth and life is coming. And before long, the autumn will follow with its promise of new fruit. That is the lesson of the fig tree.