

“LESSONS FROM A WITHERED FIG TREE.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

April 28, 2013, 10:30AM

Scripture Texts: Mark 11:12-14, 20-26

Introduction.

It has been a while since we have had one of Mark's sandwiches but we encounter another one here. Mark likes to use this little literary equivalence of a sandwich. The bread is this two part story of the fig tree that surrounds the story of the cleansing of the temple which we will consider next week.

This miracle story of the fig tree has bothered a lot of people over the centuries. It has invited untold interpretative abuse. Some people use it to suggest Jesus was mean-spirited and rash, killing a living thing out of frustration just because it didn't provide what He wanted.

Preachers and professors alike have wasted a lot of breath feeling sorry for that poor fig tree; they have waxed eloquently trying to defend that poor defenseless tree. It wasn't fig season yet Jesus zaps it for not having any figs.

The famous British philosopher Bertrand Russell took particular issue with Jesus' "vindictive fury" for blaming a tree for not bearing fruit when it wasn't the season for figs. This so tarnished the character of Jesus for him that in his book, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, he wrote "I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history" (p. 17-19).

People are quick to do that with God. People are often blaming God for being unfair or demanding that God give a reason for what He does or why He lets certain things happen. We are so incredibly arrogant and self-righteous putting God on the stand and making Him answer our questions. Where's the humility, where's the submission?

But others both wiser and humbler have seen in this event a parable of what was about to happen in Israel. This fig tree becomes one of the most useful trees that ever grew, more useful in dying than in living. This morning a withered fig tree will be our teacher.

Mark 11:12-14.

Let's begin with the first slice of bread, Mark 11:12-14.

He was hungry.

First consider very briefly the statement that Jesus was hungry. Apparently Mary and Martha didn't feed them breakfast before they left Bethany and started down the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem and the temple.

Do you know why Jesus was hungry? Yes, He was fully human like we are. Yes, His stomach growled. But that's just the surface reason.

Why was Jesus hungry? He was hungry for the glory of God and for our benefit. He who made everything in the universe, He who spoke our food into existence, He who is God and needs nothing, He became hungry to bring glory to the greatness and goodness of God and to bring to us God's salvation. He suffered hunger for you and me.

He became hungry that we could be delivered from the judgment of God and know the forgiveness of God.

Seeing a fig tree.

The time of year was March or April, the time that fig trees leaf out. At the same time of year small buds of fruit appear that are edible but not very tasty. It wasn't the season for mature figs ready to be harvested, nevertheless there should have been some early, unripe figs already. This particular fig tree was apparently full of leaves, having the sign of fruit, but no fruit.

Why was Jesus so upset that He brought down judgment on the harmless little tree?

This wasn't some angry outburst or a momentary loss of temper while being hungry or stressed. Jesus knew what kind of tree it was and He knew what season it was. All Jesus' actions were deliberate and meant to teach. This fig tree was sacrificed for the sake of an important lesson.

It may be that Jesus headed for the tree in hopes of fruit, then realizing it had none, saw in it a perfect portrayal of what He was going to face in Jerusalem.

The fig tree was a symbol of Israel. Israel was all leaves and no fruit; all about a profession of faith in their God, but no true righteousness. No spiritual health. Jesus showed what judgment awaits hypocrites, those who make a show of their religion but prove to be false and empty.

Were the disciples surprised at how quickly the fig tree withered? Were they shocked to consider that Israel, the most favored nation in all the earth, should come to so quick an end? How could this be, how could God give up on them after all He had done for them and through them?

The fig tree was said to be in full leaf; it had the appearance of being in season. Of all the nations on earth Israel had the most leaves. She had the covenants, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the temple, the Holy Scriptures, the wisdom of God in all her prophets.

Of all the nations on earth, Israel should have been abundantly fruitful, but all she had was an outward profession, but no grace, no faith, no love, no humility, no holiness. When Jesus came to Israel He found her fruitless, unfaithful and unbelieving.

This is a very serious thing Jesus did. Jesus was pronouncing God's sentence on Israel through the fig tree. He was saying it's over with Israel. Two thousand years of history, of blessing, of revelation, two thousand years of purpose was now fulfilled and finished. God's curse was coming on His covenant people. They had rejected His Son, they had rejected their Messiah.

And the judgment was fulfilled first when the curtain was torn in two during the crucifixion of Jesus and then when the Roman's overran Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70AD and scattered the Jews all over the earth.

The fig tree was withered all the way down to its roots, a sign of its complete destruction. Jesus replaced the temple, roots and all. Jesus is now the center of Israel and of all nations.

One side note. We should not be afraid to see in nature signs of God's coming wrath and judgment. What happened to the fig tree was a parable in nature of the coming curse and destruction of Israel. What we see in nature is a small glimpse into the power and justice of God. And each small glimpse should cause us to tremble at the wicked offense our sin is against a holy God and should cause us to tremble at just how great will be the final judgment on all sin.

The greatest threat facing our planet is not some natural disaster, it's the wrath of a holy God coming on those who have rejected Him. Our sin against a holy God is so monstrous that however great His judgment, it is just and justified. There is no evil in God.

If an earthquake can kill thousands, if a tsunami can kill tens of thousands, what will the judgment be like against all sin? This is why Jesus repeatedly warns, repent lest you too perish, repent for the day is at hand.

Hebrews 3:12-13 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Mark 11:20-26.

The next day Jesus uses this opportunity to teach and challenge the disciples and to prepare them for their future role in Israel and the church.

He calls them to have faith in God and to exercise that faith in bold prayer, and in particular in two kinds of prayer, prayers of judgment and prayers of forgiveness.

Faith is seen in prayer. Prayer is faith in action. True prayer is making requests of God in the faith that He hears and in the faith that He delights to answer and to do His will on earth. Those who have no doubt in God and God's power and ability and kindness, make intercession of Him. Those who have no doubt God is good, appeal to Him in prayer.

The test of true faith is found in prayer, in our humble yet bold reliance on God.

Does this mean that *whatever we ask* He will give? What about all the *mountains* that are still in their original spot? Let's take the general concern about asking whatever we want, and then address the specific matter of mountains.

Faith and prayer are intimately linked. The prayer of faith doesn't ask indiscriminately and selfishly.

C.S. Lewis tells a story of his mentor, model and hero, a great English writer by the name of **George MacDonald**. Lewis says that George had a near perfect relationship with his earthly father. Lewis reports that George as a boy and as a man never asked his father for anything without getting what he asked. Lewis observes that this says as much about the son's character as the father's. The son was careful never to ask amiss.

Quoting George MacDonald: “He who seeks the Father more than anything He can give, is likely to have what he asks, for he is not likely to ask amiss” (Lewis, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*, p. 46).

The same can certainly be said of Jesus. Jesus had a perfect relationship with His heavenly father and received everything He asked for in prayer because He never asked amiss. In all of Jesus’ requests and miracles He never asked selfishly or did any miracle for Himself. Only once did He make a request that if possible the cup be taken away, but even then He didn’t pray “My will be done, but thy will be done.”

We cannot pray in true faith that God give us no trials, no crosses; but we can pray that He cause the crosses in our life to honor Him and help us. We cannot pray in faith that we never get sick, but we can pray that we glorify Him in our sicknesses and troubles and that whatever our health and whatever our lot that we will please Him.

What about this business of moving mountains?

When Jesus said “***this mountain***” what was He referring to? Some think it was the Mount of Olives they were standing on. Some think it was the tall hill that had the fortress of Herodion on it. It was visible from the Mount of Olives. I am more inclined to think Jesus was pointing to Mt. Moriah, the mountain on which was built the temple and the city of Jerusalem and was easily seen just across the small valley from the Mount of Olives.

Jesus was talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Just the day before He violently purged the temple. Jesus was talking about a judgment represented by what He did to the fig tree.

Being blind and hard, they were about to be a nation uprooted. All her former glory, the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices was all about to be destroyed. All the leaves would soon wither.

Jesus’ instruction about moving mountains isn’t a promise to hear prayers about rearranging the landscape. It’s a promise to hear prayers of judgment against faithless and fruitless despisers and enemies of God and God’s covenant. This is a promise to hear imprecatory prayers like the Psalmist prayed.

These are not psalms about personal revenge and getting even. These are psalms that take seriously God’s justice and His intolerance of sin and evil. These are prayers of zeal for the glory of God and the honoring of His name. He’s not just the King of Peace, He’s also the King of Righteousness.

The prayers of judgment are reminders that this world is filled with devils and with evil, and that God’s redemptive purposes are hated and opposed by real enemies. Jesus is saying that it’s a prayer of faith to pray for God’s judgment on all who are His enemies and who oppose Him.

To love the truth means to hate error. To desire to walk in the way of righteousness is to also desire that the way of the wickedness be abolished.

Speaking of mountains we can pray also for the removal of any mountains that stand in the way of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As the temple stood in the way of the Gospel going forward so we

can pray for the advance of His kingdom on earth and that He would make the way straight and clear by removing obstacles.

Forgiveness.

But Jesus knows our hearts and how quickly we can become imbalanced, how quickly we can over-steer and end up in the opposite ditch. In order to guard our hearts and minds He commands us also to have a forgiving spirit, to pray prayers of forgiveness.

How do we pray these two kinds of prayer, judgment and forgiveness? We pray judgment on God's enemies and pray forgiveness for our enemies.

We must pray for our enemies, for those who have wronged us, those who have hurt and offended us. God places these kinds of people in our lives on purpose and for this very purpose. They are tests of our faith and our forgiveness.

If you bear a grudge and wish them ill, do you want the Father do the same toward you? We must be able to pray for them to the point of asking God to do for them what we ask Him to do for us, that is to forgive them and to bless them.

Application and conclusion.

Jesus left the fig tree and headed into Jerusalem to the temple. He leaves us to ponder the message of the fig tree and to take it to heart. Should we consider the magnificent success of the church in America with all its trappings of wealth and prosperity? The American church has lots of leaves, but how is the fruit?

We have so much we can boast of just here in Lynden. Our Christian and Reformed churches, our Christian schools, our Christian care centers, our Christian Hope Association, our Christian missions. But what is in our hearts? Are we increasing in repentance and faith? Are we pursuing holiness? Are we content with leaves, with outward appearances, with the form of godliness without the power? Going to church rather than gathering for worship? Loving treasures on earth more than treasures in heaven?

Let us not be rich in religion and barren in fruit. Let us not be bold in profession and weak in action, weak in the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

To be a Christian is not just a title or a profession. It's to have sound doctrine ***and*** holy living, word and deed. To be a Christian in name only is an exceedingly dangerous thing to do.

Let us learn well the lesson of the fig tree. Let us heed the warnings of Jesus. To be baptized and make a profession of faith and be on the roles of a church doesn't save our souls. These outward things are dangerous if we place in them some false sense of security for ourselves or our children. These things are just leaves.

One of the cardinal rules of Jesus is "by their fruit you shall know them." There must be fruit, fruit in our hearts, fruit in our lives, fruit in our words and actions.

Jesus hungers for the fruit of righteousness from us, He looks for it and longs for it. Christ expects to see life and growth and flourishing fruit, progress in the Gospel, not perfection, but evidence of life and growth. Without holiness no one will see God (Hebrews 12:14).

God's first and greatest blessing was "be fruitful." His greatest curse is "be no more fruitful." Barrenness, fruitlessness is a sin that will receive His just judgment.

By your fruit you will be known. Is there fruit growing, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.