

When Judy and I first started talking about which scripture I was going to preach on this morning, so she could put together the rest of the service, I told her I was going to do the Curse of the Fig Tree (which you just heard). “I’m impressed”, she said. “Way to go.” She went on to explain that in the New Testament class she took in seminary, the professor warned the students away from this particular scripture. “It’s the hardest one in the canon,” she explained. “I’ve always tried to dodge it.” I replied that that was me – too dumb to avoid the hard stuff. And so here we are. I hope that even if you don’t like what I say, you’ll at least give me points for having taken on the tough ones.

Now, there’s no shortage of religious scholars who are happy to provide interpretations – it’s what they do, after all. No part of the New Testament can be left unexplained.

The traditional interpretation is one of a number of episodes that supposedly condemn Israel and the Jews. This one is wonderfully complicated: the explanation involves botany, linguistics, sociology, and religious and historical study. The basic idea here is that the fig tree symbolizes Israel, and Jesus curses Israel when he curses the fig tree. Because Israel hadn’t fulfilled God’s purpose, Jesus pronounced judgment and found them wanting. Their religion, rather than producing the fruits that God wanted, had become empty and useless. Their punishment was to be the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the fall of the nation.

Remember that the story appears in Mark and Matthew. Even though Matthew appears before it in the New Testament, Mark was the first gospel written. Both of them were written in times when the new Christian community was seeking to separate itself from the Jewish community where it was born. Matthew’s audience in particular is a community locked in a bitter struggle with the Jewish community. It was very important to them to demonstrate that Christianity had arrived to replace Judaism and that the Jews, having rejected their Messiah, were to be left behind to history.

I have my own opinion. I’m sure most of you here are shocked that I don’t really agree with the scholarly view on this one. It seems to me that this is one of a number of stories that have been used to justify centuries of Jewish persecution and as an ex post facto rationalization of massacres and pogroms. After all, if the Bible says the Jews are cursed, why should we care what happens to them? I can’t support that – the story says different things to me.

There are two things I take from the curse of the fig tree.

The first thing is the story’s emphasizing of Jesus’s basic humanity. We talk about Jesus’s divinity all the time – the King of Kings, the Savior, the Son of God. But as John’s gospel says, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Before Jesus was the Messiah, he was a man. So consider the circumstances. By this time, he’s been on the road for what, two or three years? He’s been walking from one end of the Galilee to the other. His time has almost come, since this comes just after the triumphal entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He probably knows what’s ahead of him and it’s weighing heavily. And on this day, he was tired, dusty, and, above all, hungry. He comes to a fig tree that looks like it has fruit. And guess what: it doesn’t. And Jesus gets a little angry, and overreacts. Hey – it happens. He has his moments, just like everyone. Only in this moment, the fig tree pays the price.

We can take from this the knowledge and comfort that we are not all that far removed from Jesus. Everyone here has had those moments. You know the ones: when, for whatever reason – stress, fatigue, whatever – we just lose it for a second. Act impulsively. Behave thoughtlessly. Do things we regret.

These events emphasize Jesus’s dual nature. It seems simplistic, but consider for a second: if Jesus shares our humanity, is it so hard to imagine that we share some of His divinity?

If so, what do we do with that? And will we be ready to use it when the time comes?

The second, and more important, thing this story says is that there will come a time when we are called. Called to do something, or be something, beyond what we are. We need to be ready.

I'm sure you're asking yourselves what I mean.

Jesus spent much of his ministry among those society had forgotten – the outcasts of his time. Tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans, sinners. In doing that, he embodied the values I find truly Christian: forgiveness, compassion, fairness, tolerance, and justice.

These are the values of Progressive Christianity. That's how we are called. That's what Jesus requires of us. To step beyond ourselves, beyond the way we've always done things. To look at ourselves and our community and country and say "I can make things better." Because how we behave toward one another is the best expression of our values.

Jesus spent lots of time during his ministry stressing these values. He calls us to ask what kind of person, what kind of neighbor, what kind of human will we be? What are the values we are called to uphold?

We have an obligation to the world around us.

We have a responsibility for forgiveness. To recognize that violence is rarely the answer. To find ways to resolve differences in a way that allows everyone to come away with his self-respect and dignity intact. To not think the worst of each other and react accordingly. To compromise. To make peace.

We are called to forgive unconditionally. To forgive those who have, in the name of what they think is right, committed acts we consider horrible. Even those who murder in the name of "life".

We have a responsibility to ensure compassion. To treat each other well. To discover the shared humanity in all. To see the best in each other, and to remember that we are not very different. To approach each day with humility and let that inform our actions.

We are responsible for the children brought into this world unplanned, unwanted, unloved, and uncared-for. For those suffering from mental illness that makes it hard to live among other people. For all the powerless among us, human and non-human.

We have a responsibility to ensure fairness. A responsibility to those who are less fortunate, our neighbors who society has left behind. Those who don't have enough to eat, or can't work, or who can't support their families. Those stricken by poverty.

We are responsible for the single mother who works two jobs and goes to work sick because she can't afford health care. For the man who wants desperately to work and support his loved ones, but cannot find anything.

We have a responsibility to ensure tolerance. We must join the fight against discrimination in all its forms. Remember that we have pledged ourselves to be an inclusive faith community.

We are responsible for the man who longs more than anything to marry the partner he loves and has spent his life with, but cannot because of others' fear. We are responsible for the woman who feels marginalized and rejected by traditional society. We are called to lift them up.

We have a responsibility to ensure justice. We can make this imperfect world better. We can change things. We can promote economic justice, so the difference between rich and poor is not quite as large. That difference is great, and growing. We must promote social justice for "the last, the lost, the least, and the left-behind."

We are responsible for God's creation in all its forms. That means we are called to be good stewards of the earth and environment. All of us are responsible for the company that pours untreated waste into our rivers, sickening thousands, or the company that sinks oil and gas wells everywhere, regardless of the costs, or the company that spoils thousands of square miles and thousands of people, all in the name of a cheaper ham sandwich. We must find clean sources of energy and change our habits to use them, less destructive means of providing us with our necessities and support them.

What kind of world will we make? What will we leave behind? Maybe when we find both our humanity and our divinity, we can discover what it really means to be called to live together.

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