

“Figs, Fruit, Faith and Forgiveness”

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Mark 11: 12-14; 20-25

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Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life” but, in this reading, the words of Jesus seem to bring death to a fig tree.

Our scripture reading takes place not long after Jesus has entered into Jerusalem for the final time. He arrives to a procession of cheers and people waving and laying palm branches on the ground before him. He knows his time of teaching and healing and preparing the disciples for his departure is short, and he's not wasting any time. Jesus goes to a fig tree hoping to find figs and there aren't any. So Jesus curses the tree. From there Jesus goes to the temple and overturns the money-changing tables. He decries that they have turned the house of prayer into a den of robbers. After this 'cleansing of the temple' on their way back, they pass the fig tree again: low and behold, it is dead.

The disciples can't believe it. It certainly is curious. Why does Jesus bother with a fig tree? Is he a bit grumpy and short tempered? Low blood sugar maybe? Perhaps Jesus is having a HALT situation – you know: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired? (Hungry Afraid Lonely Tired also works—HALT). When you are those things —especially in combination — you need to be aware of it, because these things make you vulnerable and a lot more likely to lash out on unsuspecting people ... or fig trees. We have to remember that Jesus was fully human, and so experienced all the human emotions. And this was the beginning of a very intense week.

However, there is more going on here than Jesus being fully human. The fig tree is a symbol for Israel. It is also a symbol of prosperity and everything being right and good. At various times in the Old Testament, the people of God are promised that everyone will have their own fig tree. This reading about the fig tree is bookmarked around the cleansing of the temple, and this is not a coincidence. The fig tree and the temple are connected on a symbolic level. Jesus judges the fig tree because it is not bearing fruit and Jesus judges the temple and the leaders of the temple for the same reason – it has lost its primary purpose – it has no fruit and no life.

It always bugged me a little that the fig tree was not in the season to bear figs. We could maybe blame the fig tree if it was fig season and it wasn't doing its job, but this seems unfair. But here's the thing: Jesus is the author of life and represents the coming of the kingdom of God. When this Life draws near it is expected that the response will be life – no matter what season.

These are interesting and difficult times for the Church. People no longer come to church because they should. They don't come to impress their boss or because their parents, now more likely their grandparents, went to church. We are living through a massive shift in church history with the death of Christendom where church and state, church and being a good citizen were totally connected. Churches were struggling when the Pandemic hit and closed churches for over a year. The Pandemic has sped up and magnified what was already happening.

I believe that right now, we have an opportunity to listen, to pray, to vision, to remember what we are called to be as a church. Before we get back to normal we need to step back and reflect – and friends, there is no going back to normal. The world has changed and our churches will change too. Before we return to a place where we are free to worship and have gatherings related to the mission and ministry of the church, we need to take time to reflect on the particular call we have.

Let's go back to our scripture reading. The disciples are surprised that the fig tree has withered because of Jesus' words. And here Jesus teaches them what is at the heart of a living faith. He tells them that there is power in prayer and power in believing. Jesus tells them that they too can move mountains through prayer and faith. But what I want you to notice this morning is something I had not noticed before, until I was re-reading this scripture recently. *Jesus goes from talking about the faith to move a mountain to telling his disciples that they need to forgive.*

I don't think this is one random thought after another. There is a connection. There is a connection between having a faith that moves mountains and makes a difference and our willingness to forgive.

Forgiveness is one of those things that sound like a nice idea until you have someone in your life who has offended or hurt you and you are the one who needs to forgive. Jesus speaks about forgiveness a lot. "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

Let me remind you that the other person does not need to acknowledge they have been a jerk or worse in order for you to forgive. Forgiveness needs only one person to achieve—reconciliation needs two. Forgiveness begins with a decision and commitment that by the grace of God, in time can lead to a feeling of peace and love. We typically wait for the feeling inside us to change before we forgive – and that feeling is typically attached to fantasies of the other person admitting how horrible they've been. It would be nice if it worked that way, but it almost never does. When we forgive, we consciously give up all hope of a better past. The other person may never know or admit how much they wronged you, but you can still forgive and therefore be set

free from resentment and from the poison of un-forgiveness and be freed to an incredibly deep and powerful faith.

One of my favourite forgiveness stories is from Corrie ten Boom. She and her sister Betsie were Dutch Christians who were put in a Nazi concentration camp in Ravensbrück for helping and sheltering Jewish and mentally disabled people from the Nazis.

In the camp, Betsie and Corrie led Bible studies and prayers and planned to create a healing center after the war. Betsie never made it out of the camp. Along with everyone she grew weaker and weaker, and 12 days before Corrie was released, she died. After the war Corrie travelled all around Europe to speak about healing and forgiveness.



Let me read to you a story about one of those talks she gave in Germany not long after the war. This was written up in Guidepost magazine:

“It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land.

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room. And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others.

One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next [in my mind], a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

(The man did not remember Corrie but she remembered clearly this man who was a guard in her camp).

It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. “You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,” he was saying. “I was a guard in there.”

“But since that time,” he went on, “I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

And I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and could not. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it — I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us.

Corrie goes on to say she knew she needed to forgive not only because it was a commandment, but because she saw regularly the healing effects of forgiveness. There was a home established in Holland to help those who had been victims of Nazi brutality. And Corrie noticed over and over that those who forgave their enemies were able to rebuild their lives and move on in healthy ways, but those who held on to the anger and bitterness remained invalids.

“And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion — I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!””¹

Corrie goes on to say that she wished she could say that after this experience forgiveness came easily to her, but it never did. In fact, she said she found that some of the hardest ones to forgive were close friends or family members

¹ <https://www.guidепosts.org/better-living/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-forgiveness>

who had hurt her and that sometimes the middle- of-the-night thoughts still tormented her. But over time, with the decision to forgive and the daily asking God to forgive her, the peace and freedom came.

Do you remember the 4 steps? 1. Tell your story 2. Name the hurt (I was betrayed, I was abandoned, I was belittled ...) 3. Offer forgiveness. 4. Renew or Release the relationship with the one who caused the hurt.

Do you want healing? Do you want a deep faith that makes a difference beyond your life? Do you want to be a people of God who move mountains?

God knows there are mountains to be moved! Mountains of poverty, mountains of addiction, mountains of growing division between people, mountains of racism or homophobia, mountains of homelessness.

Do we want churches that are vibrant and alive, that bear fruit in every season? – In the 1960's 'everyone goes to church' seasons and today, in more desert, 2021-pandemic seasons? Then we're going to need to return to prayer and be a people who live, practice, teach and model forgiveness.

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." Revelation 22:1-2

May we be people and a church so rooted in the living waters of God that we produce fruit in every season and healing to the nations.

Thanks be to God. Amen.