

Was Jesus a Lousy Gardener?  
Mark 11:12-25  
April 11, 2010  
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
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This morning we return to our year-long study of the Gospel of Mark, and as we do so, let me remind you where we left off. The last time we read Mark, it was Palm Sunday. Jesus and the disciples entered Jerusalem – there was all kinds of fuss and hope and expectation – and Jesus himself was silent. Now, we begin Mark’s walk through the last week of Jesus’ life on earth.

And the story with which we begin is a difficult one. Indeed, William Barclay, one of the most respected conservative Bible commentators in the last hundred years said this about the passage at hand: “There can be no doubt that this, without exception, is the most difficult story in the gospel narrative. To take it as literal, factual history presents difficulties which are well-nigh insuperable.”<sup>1</sup>

Really? I mean, you can get your head around that whole walking on water thing, and calming the storm, and rising from the dead...but what we are about to read in the Gospel presents us with “difficulties which are well-nigh insuperable”? For the record, I had to look up the word “insuperable”, and it means “impossible to overcome, get rid of, or deal with successfully.” Toughest passage in the entire gospel? Well let’s take a look. Mark 11, verses 12-14:

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

Uh-oh. Somebody got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. Sounds like we have a grumpy Jesus on our hands. And while I’m making light of it, that’s exactly what Barclay and others see as problematic about this text. Seeing the Son of God being a little snippy – especially towards a plant – doesn’t seem right. It seems a little undignified for Jesus, particularly on the day after the triumphal entry. If we take this story at face value, there appears to be nothing instructive or redemptive in it.

It looks like a nice tree. It must have been pretty impressive, because Mark tells us that Jesus knew it to be a fig while he was still a long way off. There must have been quite a bit of greenery on it. But, as you’ve heard, there was no fruit. Perhaps that was due to the fact that, as Mark points out, figs weren’t in season. The apple tree in my front yard, for instance, is just showing signs of life. But in my wildest dreams, I don’t have a right to hope for a yellow delicious from that tree until August. Was the Son of God really such a bad gardener that he didn’t know when figs got ripe?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Gospel of Mark: Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1954) p. 280.

Let me make one comment about the language that Jesus uses here when he speaks to the tree. Although the Gospel is written in Greek, Jesus and his friends would have spoken Aramaic. And the Aramaic language does not differentiate between the simple future tense and a verbal command. That means that in Aramaic, Jesus would have said, “No one will ever eat fruit from you again.” Now, was that a curse – an instance wherein he was blasting the poor tree? Or simply a statement of fact – an assessment of the tree’s ability to do what fig trees are supposed to do (which is make figs)? We don’t know.

All we do know is that here is a story in which Jesus and his friends encounter an apparently healthy and vibrant tree – one with all kinds of growth and leaves – but no fruit. That’s a weird little story. Let’s continue. Mark 11, verses 15-19:

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple.

And he taught, and said to them, "Is it not written, `My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.

And when evening came they went out of the city.

Wow! Apparently the fig tree was just the warm-up act for Jesus this morning. Here they are coming into the temple, the most sacred place that the people of God know about, and Jesus is throwing around the furniture and really getting in people’s faces. What gives with that?

Let’s start by taking a look at “what everybody knew” at that time. The Temple was the place of acceptable worship in Judaism. It was, as far as any specific geographic location could be, the site of God’s rule and reign on the earth. It was THE place where the Jewish faithful could go to see the power and the majesty of the Lord. It was the only place where people could offer the sacrifices that were commanded in the various parts of the Hebrew Bible. If you were a Jew, and you wanted to be faithful, you had to go to the temple to offer your worship. It’s as simple as that – there weren’t a lot of other temples scattered around the towns; there were no denominations offering other venues to make sacrifices to YHWH. This was literally the only game in town.

Since the Temple was the only place where people could worship, well, people from all over the region and the world came there. And there was a requirement that every adult male had to pay the “temple tax” – his contribution to keeping the temple up and running throughout the year. The law specifically stated that the tax had to be paid with a half-shekel – money minted by the local

leaders. Now, folks who lived in Jerusalem had shekels. But people coming in from Syria or Galilee or Egypt or anyplace else – they had their own money.

A half shekel represented about a day and a half's wages for the average worker. But in order to convert his money into the shekel, the worshiper had to pay a commission – that usually amounted to another half a day's wage. Imagine how you would feel if this was the only place on earth where you could worship. And then imagine if when the ushers passed the plate around today, and you put in your money, they said, "Well, look, pal, here's the deal. That kind of money is no good here. Give us another 33% and we'll make sure that your money gets counted. If you don't, you can't worship here." It's a racket, is what it is. The money changers are getting rich on the backs of poor people who have come to try to be faithful and to worship.

And the people who are selling doves are even worse. The Old Testament mandates that people offer sacrifices as a part of their worship. To make it easy on those who were poor, the sacrifice could be something as small as a pair of pigeons – birds that were sold on every street in every town, usually for a few pennies. But the Law mandated that every animal sacrificed in worship had to be perfect and without blemish. When you came to worship, and you had your pigeons with you, those birds were inspected by the priests. Any bird that was found to be defective was not allowed to be sacrificed.

The priests made sure that people had access to unblemished pigeons by selling them – only the birds that were for sale in the Temple went for anywhere from fifteen to a hundred times what they would cost on the outside. Do you see what's happening here? Again, the people who are responsible for leading God's people in faithful worship are using the rules to get fantastic wealth at the expense of the poor.

So Jesus throws around the money tables and he knocked over the bird cages. There's also that little phrase there indicating that "he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple."

Jerusalem is a compact city, with a lot of people and commerce packed into a relatively small area. What had happened in those days was that folks had discovered that the outer court of the temple, called the court of the Gentiles, was a fantastic shortcut for people who wanted to go from East Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. People who were going, say, to the Farmer's market on the Mount of Olives would just cut right through the sanctuary with their shopping bags and groceries. Can you imagine that? If the delivery guys from Johnny's thought that the best way to get from their place up Stratmore was to walk up the aisle and out my study door – hey, just saving a few steps, that's all!

The thing is, people weren't supposed to even wear shoes into the temple, let alone carry groceries or luggage. But the religious leaders didn't seem to care about that – as long as the pigeon business and money exchange desks were active, they didn't mind a little extra foot traffic.

But Jesus sees it differently. He sees this Court of the Gentiles as the only place where outsiders could even attempt to worship, and instead of finding it to be a reverent place to encounter the Holy, it was full of religious leaders fleeing the poor and travelers looking for a shortcut who interrupted any attempts at worship. And he quotes from Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7, announcing that there was nothing going on here that had any relationship to God's intention for the Temple or His people.

In verses 12-14, we saw an apparently vibrant fig tree that had no figs. Here in verses 15 – 19, we see an apparently active Temple that has no real worship in it. What's next? Verses 20 – 25:

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered." And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. 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. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

Do you remember that as we've looked at Mark in recent months, we've talked about the "Marcan Sandwich"? How Mark sometimes tells two stories at the same time because the one story comments on or adds to our understanding of the other? That's what we have going on here. This is not a story about Jesus' green thumb. It's a parable discussing the sorry state of affairs in which God's people find themselves. Note that in verse 20, we learn that the fig tree has withered *from the roots*. That which ought to be sustaining the tree and leading it to life has killed it. The roots die, and it's impossible to expect life in any of the branches.

The religious leadership goes bankrupt, and how can the community grow in faith? Mark then ends these stories with some teaching on prayer, in which Jesus encourages people to talk to God about big things in their prayer lives. It's important to note that in this context, Jesus telling the disciples to "think big" in prayer is not encouraging them to pray for winning the lottery or getting a new car or saving their grandmother from a medical condition. This is a lesson wherein Jesus is telling his followers to ask for fruit to grow even where it seems unlikely. Ask God to show you how you are supposed to do that for which you were created, even when it seems impossible given your current circumstances.

I see two applications of this text for our community. First, it appears as though when it comes to either fig trees or temples, we should not confuse a lot of activity with the ability to bear fruit. People don't count on a fig tree to be a big

leaf-producer, although the leaves are essential to the main purpose: figs. The commerce at the Temple should have been intended to make worship easier and more meaningful for people, not to choke them with exorbitant fees and taxes.

That's a warning for our congregation – and any congregation. We dare not confuse all the programs we offer with actual obedience. Are the activities in which we are engaged creating space for people to have genuine encounters with the Lord who created and formed them? Or are they just keeping us busy? I'm not asking this because I'm critical of any specific idea or program here – but rather, I want us to keep this question in mind as we move forward: are we really bearing fruit? Are we really doing the things that God calls his people to do? Is there anything here that Jesus would have us clear away because it's not helpful?

The second application is similar. Just as Jesus saw that using the temple as a shortcut to the grocery store prevented or distracted people from worshiping, we have to recognize that there are some activities in our lives that prevent fruit from growing. The Gentiles couldn't begin to worship with all that buying and selling and trading and short-cutting going on. Can you be the man or woman God made you to be when your life is cluttered by a thousand distractions? What is it that needs to be cleaned out of your life so that God's spirit has room to work in and through you? To ask the same question in a more positive way, what practices can you pick up that will allow you to focus on the things that really matter about your life and your world and the world to which God is sending you?

I want to suggest that each of us could benefit from twenty or thirty minutes a day of silence. Read the scriptures and think about them. Don't speak, don't have your iPod on, don't surf the web. Clear away the distractions and allow God to speak to you.

Fig trees were made to produce figs. Temples were built to allow appropriate worship. Your life was given to you that you might be a blessing to the world and a joy to your Father. What can you do to allow yourself the best chance to bear that kind fruit?

Maybe old Barclay was right – this is the toughest passage in the gospel. Not because it's hard to believe that Jesus would use a fig tree to teach a lesson, but because it asks me some probing questions about my life, my purpose, and my ability to be the person God made me to be. Let me encourage you to sit with those questions for a while today. And maybe, just maybe, we have some spring cleaning to do. Amen.