

The Fig Tree

Luke 13: 6-9

Fig trees are especially suited to the Middle East because they can grow in poor soil and a seasonally dry climate, though they do need water and often grow deep roots to reach an underground water supply. The fig is one of the first plants that was cultivated by humanity and the ancient Hebrews considered it a sign of abundance. There is a passage in the prophet Micah which describes a future of peace and justice. It says:

“The Lord shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.” Micah 4:3,4

So, the fig tree is a symbol of freedom and peace. And here in today’s Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a man who planted a fig tree and got annoyed with it. “So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’” Now if you were a planter of fig trees you might chuckle at this, because you would know that it takes at least three years for a fig tree to fruit. The owner of the vineyard is showing his ignorance, being just a little pompous and ridiculous, looking for fruit every year for the first three years of the tree’s life.

He is also treating the tree like a servant, which is one of the habits that we humans have developed. We have come to treat the rest of Creation as though it was put there solely for our convenience and has no validity separate from us. Yet the great story of Creation tells us that “The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.” (Gen 1:12) And later “God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.” Gen 1:24,25

Long before humanity was created, there was a planet with life on it, and the planet is remarkably able to re-establish balance when we don’t interfere. We saw that in a little way in the early days of the pandemic when human activity came to a sudden halt. Although dolphins in the Grand Canal turned out to be a delightful urban myth, there is no doubt that without us going out and doing the human thing every day, the rest of Creation played and grew in surprising ways.

But now we are seeing the effects of our behavior in the great destructive fires that are decimating our forests, burning towns and killing people animals and birds up and down the West Coast. Some fire is normal here but not like this. These fires are fed by years of heat and

drought that have been brought on by climate change. And climate change comes from our desire to live more comfortably, to have more, to use more. And now we are in a vicious cycle because the fires are themselves releasing carbon into the atmosphere, just like the melting permafrost is releasing methane. Creation is way out of balance.

This has come about because we thought the fig tree was just there for our convenience. We have had a transactional approach to Creation – asking how can we use it? What’s in it for us? Rather than, how can we cooperate with the rest of Creation to live a life of balance and sharing so that all beings can live in harmony?

The gardener in this parable has a better understanding than the owner. Perhaps he or she represents that other way of being with Creation – behaving as if the God in all life matters. The gardener wisely does not chide the owner for his ignorance but says, give it time. Let it grow in its own time. I will give it the manure it needs and perhaps next year it will fruit.

In the second Creation story we hear, “The LORD God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Gen. 2:15. We are not expected to let Creation run wild around us but to till it and keep it – we are stewards of this planet Earth. We are the ones who have been entrusted with the fig trees. We are the ones who have been called to live in harmony with Creation and to use our God-given gifts of creativity and wonder and love to create beauty, to create a world of abundance, freedom and peace for all beings.

But we, like the owner, are impatient as well as self-centered. We want things to happen fast and easily. We want the peace and freedom that Micah foresaw, and we want it now. And when we don’t get it immediately it’s easy for us to give up or to resort to violent tactics to get what we want.

I was shocked to read this morning that after two Los Angeles police officers were shot at close range while sitting in their police car, anti-police protestors crowded around the entrance of the Emergency Room where they were being treated, yelling “we hope they die.” Both officers are critically wounded and we hold them and their families in our hearts...

Behavior like that is not building the world that Micah foresaw. Behavior like that is not creating freedom and peace.

But neither is doing nothing.

How are you building peace and freedom, not just for yourself but for your neighbor as well? How are you reducing your carbon footprint? How are you sharing your resources of time and money? How are you treating the little bit of Creation with which you share your life, whether that’s a potted plant, your yard or this beautiful valley and watershed that we live in?

There’s something else about fig trees.

The Babylonian goddess, Ishtar, the "primeval mother at the central place of the earth" took the form of the divine fig tree. And of course, Buddha reached enlightenment sitting under the Bodhi fig. The fig tree with its rich plump fruit and leaves big enough to cover Adam and Eve's embarrassment, is an ancient symbol of the feminine principle.

In our relationship with Creation, we need to rediscover the feminine path which doesn't seek to conquer or to exploit but seeks nurturing connection through relationship. When we are in touch with the aspect of God who is the "primeval mother at the central place of the earth" it is much easier to be patient. It takes time for a child to grow in the womb. It takes time for a fig tree to fruit. It takes time for peace and freedom to develop.

Which is why we must take courage today and keep going without losing hope. We are like women in labor or like the midwives who wait patiently, encouraging and hopeful. These are dark times. It can be difficult to see how the fig tree can grow. But its roots are growing deep in the darkness. We can't always see the growth – roots have to grow before the leaves unfurl. The grace of God is that our gardener is providing just what we need. Our gardener is digging around us and giving us plenty of manure with which to grow.

In this time of darkness, we are the midwives of tomorrow, so let us be like the fig tree and send our roots down deeply to find the water of God. And let us remember that soon, tomorrow, next month, next year, the fig tree will fruit and we will rejoice together.