

FIG-ure it Out

Mark 11:12-25, Jeremiah 24:1-10

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit

<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/sermon01-20-2019.mp3>

As we continue with our discussion of the Gospel of Mark, I'm sure you realize that this is not the only Gospel account of the life of Jesus. "Of course," you say. "Matthew, Luke, and John are all Gospels." You may not be aware, however, that for several hundred years after Jesus' death there were dozens of "gospels" written; some of these contained sayings attributed to Jesus, others had stories of Jesus as a child, and still others were filled with some then-popular teachings and simply 'credited' to Jesus of Nazareth. None of these gospels was recognized by the church then or now, and they have been pretty thoroughly discredited.

One of my favorites from this group, however, is a volume called "The Gospel of Thomas". It contains a number of far-fetched tales, among them an account of the time that the boy Jesus was angered by one of his playmates; Jesus cursed the boy and what do you know? The kid withered up and died. Well, the community heard about it and was upset, and so they told Joseph that his kid had to stop killing people or the whole family would have to leave town. According to the Gospel of Thomas, when young Jesus heard about that, he struck the entire community blind. Then, Joseph is alleged to have taken the son of God by the ear and "wrung it 'til it was sore" and made Jesus un-curse the village.

I think about those legends when I hear today's Gospel account of the time that Jesus lost his temper with the fig tree. You hear this account of Jesus's frustration and you want to say, "Really, Jesus? You've just entered Jerusalem for the

worst week of your life and you're talking to fruit trees?" And then you think, "Why in the world was this story included in the Gospel? How did this make sense to the early church?"

I want you to think back to something I told you a few months ago. Do you remember "the Markan sandwich?" There are plenty of times when the author of the second Gospel starts a story, and then interrupts himself to tell a different tale, and then gets back to the first story. I know, it's as annoying as all get out when your mom does it, but the author of Mark uses it as a device to let one story offer commentary on another. Maybe you'll recall that Mark starts to talk about a 12 year old girl who gets sick, and then he interrupts that by mentioning a woman who's been sick for 12 years, and then he goes back to the little girl. The stories connect, and in looking at both parts, we get more meaning than we could by considering them independently.

Today's Gospel presents us with a classic Markan Sandwich. One day, Jesus goes to check out a fig tree. Since it's not fig season, the disciples are not too surprised when there are no figs on it. But Jesus apparently loses his mind and curses the tree.

They leave that curious incident and show up in the Temple, where Jesus really appears to let his emotions get the best of him and he flips tables and drives out business people, all the while preaching that God's house was for prayer, not commerce. Of course, nobody there likes it, but what can they do? Jesus is at the height of his popularity.

The next morning, they pass by the fig tree, and it is withered away – from the roots up.

I'm here to tell you that the author of Mark intended us to see the episode of the fig tree as being connected to what happened in the temple. Listen: there are plenty of places in

the Jewish scriptures where the people of God are compared to a fig tree. The passage from Jeremiah that Lydia shared with you is only one example. In those verses, it's unmistakable: Jeremiah is looking at a fig, but he's thinking about the leadership of the people of God. The author of Mark counted on other people remembering that passage, and others like it, when he tells us about a controversy at the Temple on the same day that a fig tree was condemned. When Jesus curses a fig tree for not having any fruit, and then wanders into the temple and discovers that the leadership has failed, the first readers of Mark would have made the connection. And then when Jesus' friends discover that the wretched tree has died from the roots up, they would understand this to be a commentary on the spiritual bankruptcy of the people who were called by God to be a light and to be a blessing for the world. Just as the roots of the tree had gone, so too had the roots of the nation's spirit.



¹I hope you've heard this story of Jesus driving the moneychangers and merchants out of the temple, and we could talk about many different aspects of it. However, since we are spending the year talking about the Gospel of Mark, I'd like to focus on one of the few places where Mark actually tells *more* of a story than do the other Gospel writers. Although this episode is shared in all four of the Gospels, Mark is the only one to include the phrase, "and he would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts."

It's an odd little detail, really. I mean, there was all kind of flagrant sin going on – consumerism in the house of the Lord! Extorting the poor to buy the sacrificial animals! Apparent collaboration with the occupying army for economic profit! Why does Mark point out that Jesus also talked about

¹ *The Cleansing of the Temple*, Alexander Smirnov (contemporary, Russian).

people who were walking through the temple courts with stuff that they may have bought elsewhere?



Well, it has to do with the location of the temple in relation to the rest of the city. The temple was right up against the eastern wall of the city, and just past the temple to the east was the Mount of Olives and then the road to Jericho and Bethsaida. In addition to the flagrant and calculated hucksterism that was going on inside the temple, there were people who were simply using that sacred ground as a shortcut.

Do you see? The ordained and called leadership had deliberately secularized the outer courts of the worship area by engaging in commerce to their own advantage there. As a result of that, it wasn't too long before the population of the city thought so little of the sanctity and beauty of the temple that it became the fastest way from point A to point B. There was no reverence, there was no engagement – people were just passing through, making sure that their errands got run.

And Jesus put a stop to that. “This is not a short cut!” he roared. And then, maybe weeping, he put his head down and said, “You can't just show up here and not be affected by this place and these people and the truth that is here...”



²Mark alone points out that Jesus was not only frustrated at the people who were actively undermining the sanctity of the holy, but he was also clearly frustrated by those who had become so accustomed to not finding anything praise-worthy at the Temple that they thought of it as just another footpath. In this passage, Jesus seeks to re-orient their thinking and to prevent them from showing up

² *Jesus Cleansing the Temple*, illustration from a 17th-century Ethiopian manuscript.

on holy ground guided by “auto-pilot”; he reminds them of the potential for transformation that can come when we encounter the Holy One.

Jesus didn’t want anyone carrying stuff through the temple without stopping to remember why there *was* a temple in the first place...

I’ve thought a lot about that this week, and I’ve thought about the times I’ve shown up at a worship service not really expecting much of anything to happen. I was there to be polite, or to be seen by someone else, or because I had made a deal that if I showed up for church, then I could go and do something that I really wanted to do. In other words, there have been a lot of times that I think I’ve carried my things right through the temple, disregarding the opportunities for encounter with the Holy because my mind was elsewhere. And I would suspect that I’m not the only person in this room who can say that.

How do we become a people who show up in worship on purpose, who arrive here so expectantly that we are able to “clear the decks” and set down the other baggage we’ve been carrying in order to embrace the truth and be wrapped in love?

Well, my first answer to that question may be a bit simplistic, but on the other hand, it’s one that everyone in this room has already done today: that is, simply show up. In order to have access to any possible fruit that might come from worship, I’ve got to be here. I’ve got to set aside time intentionally to be present with folks like you in a place like this.

In some ways, coming to worship is a bit like visiting Crafton Heights. As I wander through the city and talk to other folks, almost everyone in other neighborhoods says

something like this: “Wow, Crafton Heights... Yeah, I’ve heard of it. I’ve never been there before, but it sounds familiar to me...” And I always respond by saying, “Yes, if you want to come to Crafton Heights, you have to come here on purpose. You’re probably not going to stumble into my neighborhood because you’re drawn by the fantastic museums here, or the fine theater, or the many retail outlets or exotic dining venues we have. You’ve got to come to the Heights because you want to be in the Heights.”

It’s the same way when it comes to worship. I’m not saying that it’s impossible to encounter the Holy in random places – far from it – but I am saying that the most likely way that you’re going to find time to be in the Presence is when you set aside time intentionally to be available for the gift and discipline of worship.

More than that, though – more than simply entering into the place of worship, I want to encourage you to enter into the *practices* of worship. When I put together the order for worship each week, I try my best to give you some really good things to say and to sing. In fact, we call the contents of the order of worship the *liturgy*. That word – liturgy – comes from two old Greek words, *leitōs*, meaning “public”, and *ergos*, meaning “working”. The liturgy is the work of the people. It is not a performance, and it is not a contest. The spoken and sung prayer give you a chance to speak and sing what is true!

Sometimes, though, we’re not all that great at it. We forget where we are; we forget who we are; or we get self-conscious. And so we wind up being in a room where we mumble along during the responsive readings, or we sing amazing words of praise as though we’re waiting in line at the filling station: “Praise God (yawn) from whom all (stretch) blessings flow (check phone)...”

Beloved, let me encourage you to try this. I know, some of the songs I pick are ones that you wouldn't. Sorry for that. But lend your voice, your heart, your spirit to the liturgy. Don't watch - or even worse, criticize - the work of the people, share in it!

And one more thing that you can do as you seek to become one who is equipped to bear the fruit that comes from true worship: listen for the places in the liturgy and the scripture that push back on you a little bit. We've talked before about a phenomenon called "confirmation bias" – where we tune into a program or a website because we're pretty sure that it's going to tell us what we think we already know and allow us to hear what we want to hear.

Praise God, sometimes that happens here, and it's good. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound..." Ain't it the truth?! Don't I need to hear that?!

But what if I say, or the lyrics indicate, or the scriptures contain something that is challenging or irritating? Do we allow God to confront us in some way that gets us thinking about something? As you participate in the work of the people, listen for ways that God intrudes into your own life or heart or preconceived notions.

Seriously: when Jesus was talking, he got people so worked up that they wanted to kill him. Are we such different people, are we so much better than they were, that when he speaks we nod approvingly and say, "Ah, yes. Good point, Jesus. That's my Jesus. You tell 'em, Jesus..."?

Or can we come to worship and be challenged and poked and prodded (and maybe a little irritated) too?

Jesus closes this passage with a brief teaching on the power of prayer and practice. He links the idea of belief with that of behavior, reminding his followers that they can believe

in the power of prayer, but as they pray for the miraculous, they are called to treat their sisters and brothers with kindness and grace. He encourages them to dream big when it comes to prayer, and to know that the things that happen in worship and in prayer will have an effect.

And sometimes we hear that and we say, “Well, maybe for someone else. But to be honest, I’m not sure what it does for me. I can’t remember the words to the bible verse I just read. I’m not feeling anything overwhelming when we do the liturgy here.”

Maybe. But maybe we’re just not noticing. There was a fellow who stopped at the preacher’s home one Spring day and found his pastor out in the tool shed. He said, “Pastor, I’ll get to the point. I’m in church every week, and I listen to what you say, but I don’t remember any of it. I hear those Bible verses, but they just fade away. I think you need to hear it from me – I’m going to stop wasting my time and yours.”

Without really looking up, the preacher said, “Well, Ron, I’m sorry to hear that, but I’m not going to try to talk you out of it. Instead, let me ask you to do one thing.” She handed the man a couple of dusty, dirty old terra cotta planters that were filled with cracks. “Look, here’s what I want you to do: tomorrow morning, go down to the creek behind your house and fill each of these with water. Carry them up the path to your back porch and set them down. I want you to do that every morning for two weeks. Don’t come to church if you don’t want to, but promise me you’ll do that.”

The man took the planters, and thought that his pastor was crazy, but he agreed to it.

Two weeks later the pastor showed up at the man’s home. “I’m here for my planters, Ron,” she said. “Let’s go around back and get them.” And as they stood on the back

porch looking at the path down to the river, the Pastor said, “I get it, Ron. You think that all that time you spend in worship is wasted, because you can’t remember it.”

The man nodded. The pastor went on. “It seems like a waste of time, right? I mean, if nothing changes, why bother?” The man wasn’t sure where the preacher was going, but he nodded again.

The pastor picked up the pots and said, “Ron, I asked you to fill these things with water every day. But will you look at this? They’re dry as a bone. Did you do as I asked?”

Ron assured the pastor that he had, but that all the water had leaked out. “What did you expect? They’ve got cracks all over them.”

The pastor seized the moment... “So you’ve been getting water every day, but there’s no water here now. Has anything changed?”

Ron looked at the pots. They were still cracked, but all the cobwebs and the mud had washed away by the daily rinsing. He looked at the edges of the path, and he saw where the grass was greener because of the water that had leaked from the pots during his daily exercise. And he knew.

And he was in worship the next Sunday, singing loudly and reading intently. Because he got it. It matters.

Beloved, it may sometimes seem as though your reality has not changed, but I’m here to tell you that the disciplines and practices of faith are designed to promote change and grow fruit in lives like yours and mine. May God bless us with the ability to hear, to believe, and to bear fruit because we are willing to encounter the Holy One. Thanks be to God! Amen.