

Fig Tree Fools

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
Labor Day Weekend
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 6, 2015
Text: Mark 13:28-31

“History is going someplace.” This is a quote I came across in my preparatory reading for this week’s sermon and it just really struck me. On the one hand, it’s a pretty obvious statement of truth. History is going someplace. But where is the question. Therein lies our anxieties about the future. We know we’re on the road to somewhere, individually as well as a society, a culture, a church, and even the whole world. History is going someplace and us right along with it. But how do we know what that means for us? Such is the stuff of sleepless nights and antacids in abundance for sure.

On the other hand, the statement “history is going someplace” is quite comforting. We are caught in the midst of the stream of time rushing forever forward into the future and over which we have no control. We are quite literally along the ride. The question then becomes, what is our responsibility in the midst of the course of history? What is our obligation to God and to each other within this life, embedded as it is in the relentless unfolding of time?

This complex and highly nuanced question is at the core of this seemingly simple parable of Jesus' about a fig tree. Actually, it is pretty simple, direct as Jesus' parables tend to go. Jesus uses the annual growing cycle of a fig tree as an example of how we are to recognize when times are changing. As soon as the fig tree's branches become tender and it puts out new leaves, you know summer is coming. In other words, we can recognize when change is in the making because there are unmistakable signs it is on the way. Like global warming, or climate change, or however you like to think of the now inescapable reality that our planet is warming up at a rate fast enough to melt the polar ice caps at an alarming rate. Climate scientists all agree on this. What to do about it is less clear, but the reality of melting arctic glaciers is now beyond doubt or question. The signs of change in our weather to come are unmistakable, just like new leaves on a tree are a sure sign that the growing season is underway.

Interestingly, Jesus doesn't stop with this observation. He continues on by observing that "when you see these things taking place you know that God is very near." In fact, he says God is at the gates, ready to break into the contemporary reality. This big change is so close, Jesus says, that the current generation will still be around when they happen. Now let's stop right here and remind ourselves that Jesus was NOT talking about global warming. Nor was he talking about the "end times" or the

“Second Coming” even though these latter two are often read into this parable. Jesus was talking about something which was crystal clear to him that everybody else couldn’t see.

Jesus knew that the change he was bringing about in how people understood their connection to God would result in tremendous upheaval in the Jewish faith he was trying to reform as well as in the Roman dominated culture in which he was preaching and teaching. He knew what he was preaching – that God loves the least of these just the same as if not more than the people at the top with power and wealth and total control. “The preferential option for the poor” is what liberation theologians like Segovia call it. And Jesus was right on point. What he was saying did upset the entire appplecart of everyday life in ancient Palestine. So much so that within four decades, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed as Jesus had predicted it would be. To be fair, other revolutionary forces – the Zealots chief among them – were already at work fomenting rebellion against the Roman occupiers of Palestine. But, still, Jesus saw big changes to life and culture and faith in the making, and he wanted the people to know about them too. He also wanted them to know that no matter what changes they would face, God would never change. God would always be there with them.

As I was pondering this parable this week, I became very curious about figs and fig trees. I knew Peter’s mother tried to

grow one once but it never took hold, remaining forever a stick with one leaf stuck in a pot of dirt. Eventually, she gave up and tossed it. I also knew that my mother, the pickiest of all picky eaters, loved figs. I mean she *loved* figs but she would never, ever buy them for herself. She would order them, though, at breakfast whenever we were on vacation at a hotel. In fact that became one of the markers for me as to whether or not we were really on a vacation – had my mother had her figs yet?

So, a few fun facts I discovered about fig trees: 1) A young fig tree will not bear fruit unless the dirt around its roots is cultivated and carefully tended, explaining my mother-in-law's stick fig that ended up in the trash. 2) Old fig trees which are neglected – not cultivated and carefully tended – deteriorate quickly and die. 3) The first green figs of the growing season appear on old growth branches; it's only the fruit which appears toward the end of the growing season that appears on the new growth branches. 4) If no figs appear on old branches by the time new leaves and new growth appear, the tree will not bear any fruit that season. So, on fig trees, if the old growth doesn't produce any fruit first, no fruit will appear on the tree at all, no matter how lush the leaves of new growth might be.

As I considered these fig facts, I suddenly saw a richness in this simple parable of the fig tree I had never really comprehended before. In fact, this parable of the fig tree is a road

map to growing a health church, ready to face the future, whatever that future might hold. Think about it. A young tree, like a person new to faith and the church, will not bear any fruit – become an active member – if it is not carefully tended by those who are experienced and comfortable in their own growing faith. Similarly, old trees – folks who been around church all their lives – will deteriorate quickly if they are neglected and left uncultivated. This is precisely why rejuvenating our visitation ministries in the weeks ahead is so critical.

Now here's the really interesting connecting point between fig trees and the church. Green figs appear on old growth branches first! Translated into the church, that means our new growth has to start with the people already here. We can't be looking for some magic Miracle Grow that we sprinkle around the outside the church to bring new folks inside. We have to be the ones to spark the first fruits of new growth by talking about our faith and our church and inviting folks to come and see what we're talking about first hand. Then, once that new growth takes root and begins to flourish here, then that new growth takes over the work of producing new fruit and the cycle continues.

And we can't forget that fourth fig tree fun fact. If no fruit appears on the branches before new leaves appear, the tree will not bear any fruit. If no fruit appears before new leaves appear, the tree will not bear any fruit. So, in the church, if we don't have

any new fruit – new people who are active or people who’ve been around but not active before – if that new fruit doesn’t appear before new leaves appear, then we’re left with a whole lot of leaves – people who come and go but add nothing substantial to the life of the church but a nice appearance.

And that, dear friends, is the challenge of the church in the 21st century. Make no mistake – it is *THE* challenge because we need more than new leaves. We need new fruit. And we need to find that new fruit in a world which thinks of us a fig tree fools because church and faith and God are still important to us. Why go to church, some of them say. It’s just a relic of an older, unenlightened time when people were simple minded and thought they needed a deity to cope with life. Why believe in God when there is so much pain and evil in the world. There can’t be a God because why would God allow or ever cause such evil to exist. Why believe Jesus was any more than a nice guy who told stories and got himself killed? Resurrected to new life? Naw, that’s just some ancient zombie story. And don’t even talk to me about the Holy Spirit. That’s the craziest thing of all. Some spiritual essence that provides you with the power and inspiration to change the world? That’s nonsense. The world’s a mess and it’s going to stay that way. That’s why I only worry about #1 – me. Fig tree foolishness – that’s what Christianity is. Or so too many in the world outside our doors believe. Too many in the world

outside our doors have bought into the lie that all that matters is themselves.

But guess what? Jesus answers that in this parable too. Change is coming, Jesus says. Change is always possible, and is always coming. The current generation will see it happen. The current generation – the people alive right here and right now – can *make* it happen. But it takes more than people to bring that kind of cosmic change about. That takes God and God’s people working together to keep the roots of faith and hope cultivated and nourished so that faith keeps growing in our church and keeps bearing the fruit of new disciples. It takes attentiveness to the needs of the youngest in our church and the oldest in our church and everyone in between. It takes patience and hard work, trusting that God will provide the growth, the new fruit we need in surprising ways from surprising sources, before it’s too late.

Dear friends, as you head out in the rest of your Labor Day Weekend and the rest of your week and your life, I want you to be thinking about fig tree fools and whether or not you can be one, whether or not you are one already. The simple truth is that we need fig tree fools – people who know that God is alive and well in the world and in our lives; that Jesus always pilots us through the changes sure to come; that the Holy Spirit lifts us up on wings of grace and hope, power and strength. Dear friends, that is US, in our church, right here and right now. It has to be. Otherwise, we

are just along for the ride as history goes someplace and all we can do is hold on for dear life.

Fig tree fools or chumps who fall for the false messages of a jaded world that preaches individual human beings comprise the only supreme beings in the universe? That's the choice before you, each day. I guess it comes down to where you place your roots. In the rich soil of God's beloved Creation grounded in faith and lived out in the church? Or in the hard, crusted over, weed infested wisdom of the world? Up to you. I know I'm feeling foolish. Who's with me? Amen.