



WORSHIPPING AT HOME

*with UCC Westerly
during the Covid-19 outbreak*

April 26, 2020
Second Sunday of Eastertide
Earth Day Sunday

- Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and perhaps a lily or daffodil or tulip to get that Easter feel.
- If you are doing this on your own, settle into your worship space around 9:30am on Sunday and begin...
- A reminder I will be streaming our worship service on Facebook Live beginning at 9:45am. You can still access it even if you are not on Facebook by going to the church website, www.uccwesterly.org, and clicking on the Facebook icon on the homepage.

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Light your candle as a reminder of God's presence with you

Gathering Music *Down to the River*

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CALL TO WORSHIP (from *Earth Prayers from Around the World*, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav p. 103)

Grant me the ability to be alone,
May it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grasses,
Among all growing things and there may I be alone,
And enter into prayer to talk with the one that I belong to.

Opening Song – “For the Beauty of the Earth”

[WORDS: Folliot S. Pierpoint ;MUSIC: Conrad Kocher, © 1989, United Methodist Hymnal. All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569)

1. *For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth, over and around us lies;
Refrain: Lord of all to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.*
2. *For the beauty of each hour of the day and of the night;
Hill and vale, and tree and flower, sun and moon and stars of light;
Refrain*
3. *For the joy of ear and eye, for the heart and mind's delight,
For the mystic harmony linking sense to sound and sight;*

Refrain

4. *For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth and friends above, for all gentle thoughts and mild.*

Refrain

UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION (from *An Iona Prayer Book*, Peter Millar, 1998, p. 53)

Guide and Friend of every seeking heart, you take upon yourself all that burdens our lives: our days of doubt, our divided hearts, our physical weakness and that fear of the future which is often our companion. And you transfigure them, freeing us of all that weights us down. Lord of the perplexed, enable us today to rediscover your amazing truth – that in your strength we truly begin to walk anew with lightened step and clearer vision, moving from shadows into the clear flowing waters of your healing, gentle grace. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Morning Message

Wasting Time

Luke 13:6-9

Rev. Ruth

A TIME OF PRAYER

- If you are joining in the prayers during the Facebook Live broadcast, before worship take a few minutes to send them to me via text, email or Facebook message at least 20 minutes before the service begins.
- If you are using this worship resource on your own, after making your list of prayer concerns, sit in silence and let your mind calm down. When you are ready, aloud or just in your own mind, ask God to bless each of the persons and situations on your list.
- End with the Lord’s Prayer.

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings*

**Doxology “Praise God from who all blessings flow; Praise Christ all creatures here below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen.”*

[WORDS: Thomas Ken, MUSIC: Louis Bourgeois, © OCP; All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

CLOSING SONG – “Hymn of Promise”

[WORDS & MUSIC: Natalie Sleeth, ©1986 Hope Publishing Co.; All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
In cocoons a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there’s a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*
2. *There’s a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
There’s a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future; what it holds a mystery,*

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

3. *In our end is our beginning, in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

A Prayer of Benediction

May the Light of God surround you, the Love of God enfold you, the Power of God protect you and the Presence of God watch over you. May you always know and treasure in your heart that wherever you are, God is already there waiting. Amen.

Music as the Service ends – God Has Been Good to Me

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*\*On behalf of the leadership of UCC Westerly and myself, I would like to offer our deepest gratitude to our members and friends who have been so generous with their pledges and gifts to the church during this challenging time. We would also like to invite any of our new friends joining us now via Facebook Live to support the many vital ministries of this church. You may mail your checks, made payable to UCC Westerly, to us at 9 Castle Hill Road, Pawcatuck, CT 06379.*

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VIRTUAL FELLOWSHIP TIME!

- If you have access to a computer, tablet or an iPhone with a camera, you can join us for a Zoom Fellowship time by clicking on the link below at 11am. You will be able to see and chat with folks and they will be able to see and chat with you. Here is your invitation to the gathering:

Ruth Hainsworth is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Sunday Fellowship

Time: Apr 26, 2020 11:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/387873891?pwd=UUNoaVltbjJMWU1naWh4QzZoWEUxZz09>

Meeting ID: 387 873 891

Password: 012305

SCRIPTURE READING
Morning Message

Wasting Time

Luke 13:6-9
Rev. Ruth

Figs are not something with which I am very familiar, although they figure prominently in one of my most vivid childhood memories. Occasionally when I was a child, I would travel with my parents for a stay in a hotel. These occasions were very memorable for many reasons, but one in particular sticks out for me. Whenever we stayed in a hotel (back before the days when breakfast “bars” became the norm), my mother would always order kadota figs for breakfast. I will forever remember this because for most of her life all my mother ate for breakfast was shredded wheat with skim milk and a half a piece of toast. Maybe marmalade on the toast now and then. Not so on those rare holiday hotel trips when kadota figs would be on the breakfast menu. It always sounded so exotic when she ordered them and my mom was anything but exotic. This is how I came to appreciate just how special figs must be. So, when I encountered the three parables about Jesus and a fig tree, I was immediately curious.

Luke’s version of Jesus’ parable of the fig tree is very different from the other two versions which appear in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. In fact, the only point of commonality the three parables share is a fig tree. In both Matthew and Mark, the story does not end well for the tree. In these two versions Jesus is once again on the road with the disciples when they pass a fig tree growing by the side of the road. Jesus is hungry so he looks to the tree to pick a fig to eat, but he finds none on the tree. Mark says this is because it was not yet the season for figs but Matthew makes no mention of this. What they do both agree on is what happens when Jesus doesn’t find any figs. He curses the fig tree and the next time he and the disciples pass by it later the same day, they realize it has completely withered away. Yikes! Jesus yells at a tree because it doesn’t have any fruit growing on it and kills it? That doesn’t sound like Jesus! That doesn’t sound like Jesus at all!!! Mark makes a point of saying Jesus cursed the fig tree the day after he turned over the tables in the temple, almost as though excusing what Jesus did because he was obviously still upset by what happened the day before. Matthew says something similar, adding that Jesus had also encountered some people who were angry with him for not doing more to help them. Clearly, Matthew and Mark realize this behavior is out of character for Jesus too. In fact, they end the parable with Jesus saying it is an illustration of just what is possible when one has sufficient faith “so as to move mountains.” But, it seems like a very odd thing to use one’s faith to accomplish – punishing a tree for not bearing fruit.

This is why I like Luke’s version so much more. In Luke, the fig tree is the central character in a story Jesus tells about a man who grows figs on trees in his vineyard. The man came to see if the tree had fruit on it and when it didn’t, he told the gardener to cut it down because he had been waiting three years for it to bear fruit. He even accuses the fig tree of wasting soil, implying that continuing to care for it was a waste of time! But, the gardener had other plans. He urged the man to give him one more year to tend to the tree. He promised to loosen the soil around the roots and add manure to the soil as fertilizer. Then, he said to the man, if it bears no fruit next year, he would cut it down. But if it does bear fruit, then all is well and good. The only time wasted would be the gardener’s. Luke sees this as a story not about punishment for a lack of some sort but

instead as a story about patience for the nurturing of faith in people who are, shall we say, slow learners. And those slow learners, dear ones, are all of us.

What are we to make of these stories about a barren fig tree? In two of them, their lack of fruit makes Jesus angry enough to destroy them, then using this action to teach about the power of faith. I'm sorry, but this just does not sound like Jesus to me. This sounds like a story remembered inaccurately and then shared quickly. It also seems like an odd example to illustrate the power of faith. Hadn't Jesus been showing the power of faith already through every act of healing, every act of teaching about the love of God meant for all? Why would Jesus just lose it one day over a piece of fruit? I doubt he would, although I can believe that at this point in his life – coming as he knew he was to end of his earthly ministry – he was tired and frustrated with the lack of faith, the lack of understanding of God as he understood God, which he was constantly encountering. I have no doubt he was angry and tired but would he curse a fig tree and then claim it was an act to demonstrate the power of faith? No, I just don't think so.

What the versions of the barren fig tree story we encounter in Matthew and Mark do teach us is one of the most important tools we need to have at our command whenever we approach the study of the Scriptures and that is a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” “Hermeneutic” simply refers to a theory or method used in reading and interpreting Scripture. So, a “hermeneutic of suspicion” is just that – a method of reading Scripture that is comfortable raising questions about a text. In other words, a hermeneutic of suspicion encourages us to read the Bible as the humans we are. We are to bring all of who we are as people of faith, as followers of the Risen Christ, to the task of reading and understanding the text and applying what we discover in the text to our lives. That's the interpretation part. So, when I am saying that this story about Jesus killing a fig tree because he was angry it didn't have fruit doesn't sound like Jesus, I am reading it with a hermeneutic of suspicion. I am using my own knowledge of how I have experienced Jesus in the entirety of the rest of the biblical texts about him to say, “this doesn't sound like Jesus to me.” And that is a perfectly acceptable way to read this text.

Let me be clear, I am not saying we can pick up any text and twist it to mean whatever we want it to mean. Far from it. Reading a text with a hermeneutic of suspicion is more work, not less because your suspicion must be justified through a broad knowledge of the Bible and how it came to be. Interesting to note is that many folks who claim to be “fundamentalist” do exactly that. They insist there is one and only one way to read the Bible – taking it word for word as the absolute and only truth about God. What they fail to take into account is that this doesn't work for one very simple reason – the Bible contradicts itself all over the place. The story of the barren fig tree is a perfect example of this. So is the story of the Resurrection which describes that moment differently in every single Gospel account. This is why the reading and studying of the Bible with a hermeneutic of suspicion is so vitally important. It *requires* the student, the person of faith genuinely curious about who Jesus was and how knowing Jesus transforms one's life and relationship with God, to think about what the text is saying in a rational, thoughtful way. It requires you, in other words, to bring your full self into the study of the text and into your relationship with the Living God. This,

dear ones, is how we cultivate a living, powerful, transformative faith that can and does move mountains.

So, why this story today of all days? Why this story as an entry point for our consideration of Earth Day and all that entails? For one very simple reason – most of the people who are climate deniers and eco-responsibility shirkers are people who claim to ground those beliefs in faith. Caring for the environment is a waste of time, they argue. It's bad for business, they insist. Climate deniers say all the extreme weather we are experiencing and the rising sea levels as the polar ice caps melt are not caused by human actions but instead are just part of the natural course of things. The eco-responsibility shirkers who want to do away with pollution controls and restricted access to oil and mineral rich areas in our national parks, preserves and even off our coastlines say God says we can do this because God gave humans “dominion” over the earth. For them dominion means domination, destruction and whatever it takes to extract the mineral wealth of the world no matter the cost to the environment. This is why, dear friends, I want you to understand and appreciate that it is not only okay to question what you read in the Bible, it is what God expects you to do. It is what God wants you to do. It is what God gave you the tools to do through the gifts of intelligence and insight with which God has blessed you.

Dear ones, as we pause in our journey through the Valley of Covid-19 to remember this beautiful planet God has entrusted to our eternal care, let us dare to believe God wants and expects us to respond to the world we find outside our doors as the gardener does in his encounter with the owner of the vineyard angry at a barren fig tree. “Let me dig around the roots a bit and add manure to see if we can encourage the fruit to grow.” So, get out your shovels and find some manure because our world surely needs the dirt loosened at its impacted roots. It surely needs to be nurtured and loved with whatever it needs to be restored to the health it enjoyed when God first gifted it to Adam and Eve. This is, in fact, one of the blessings of the Coronavirus lock-downs and travel restrictions. What feels like time being wasted in lock-down is really a gift to our planet. Air and water pollution are dropping to levels not seen in decades. Our blue skies are vividly blue once more! As our human impact on the earth is diminishing, God's Creation is healing before our very eyes. How absolutely amazing is that! God can make something good come out of anything! Now that is faith to move mountains!

As we come to the end of our ponderings this morning, I offer you one last hermeneutic of suspicion question to bring to Luke's version of the barren fig tree story: who is the gardener? Worth thinking about. HINT: the other time we hear about a gardener upending things, it turns out to be Jesus. My goodness, imagine that... Amen.