

Conflict and Choices

Mark 11:12-25

Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

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

Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, '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 when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

The Lesson from the Withered Fig Tree

In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.' Mark 11:12-25

RECAP: During this Lenten Season, we are looking at the last week, Holy Week, in more detail. Last Sunday we learned that Jesus was making a proclamation of his purpose. People would have to decide whether they would follow the Power of the Empire or become a part of the Kingdom of God.

The message of Mark is not about Jesus. It is about the Kingdom of God vs. the Power of the Empire! It all comes to this:

1. Following Jesus means following him on the way!
2. The way leads to Jerusalem.
3. Jerusalem is the place of confrontation with the authorities.
4. Jerusalem is the place of death and resurrection.

In our scripture lesson today, Jesus continues his proclamation. Having entered Jerusalem the day before, he viewed the Temple, and then returned to Bethany late in the day, on what we now

call Palm Sunday. On Monday, Jesus returns to Jerusalem and begins a most difficult day to interpret.

Verses 12 to 25 form what some would call "a Mark Sandwich." That is, we begin with one incident, followed by a second seemingly unrelated incident and then returns to the first incident. In this case, we have:

1. Jesus finds no figs on a tree and curses it; his disciples over hear his curse.
2. Jesus disrupts access to the Temple and explains his actions; the chief priests and scribes keep looking for ways to kill Jesus.
3. The next day, the fig tree is found withered to its roots; Jesus teaches about trusting God without hesitation and about praying.

Just like a regular sandwich, we are meant to digest all three layers at once. To look at the incidents individually is to miss the point of the message.

Another problem is that we want to take the text literally. Again, we must avoid doing this. To properly understand this day in Holy Week, we must look at the bigger picture.

1. The first incident is difficult to understand. The writer is commenting about Jesus' internal state and behavior. Jesus being in a state of hunger seems unlikely since he had spent the night at Bethany and presumably had a morning meal.

How does the author know why Jesus went over to the fig tree? How does he know Jesus went looking for figs, or expected to find figs? Jesus was not an idiot. He knew like everyone else alive on the planet at the time also knew that fig trees do not have fruit on them in the Spring. (Which is the time of year it must have been, since it is the time of the Passover Festival.)

Finding no figs Jesus proceeds to curse the tree!

2. When Jesus enters the Temple - actually the outer courtyard of the Temple - he finds there the normal and NEEDED activities going on: money exchanging; selling doves; bringing goods into the Temple. These activities were long-standing practices that were all necessary in order for the Temple to properly function as a place of worship and sacrifice. The money exchangers were needed to allow exchanging Roman coins with the image of Caesar, "Son of God," on them (which violated the commandments to have no other Gods, and to not make any false images or idols) for coins that could be used to pay the annual Temple tax. And doves that were needed for the ritual sacrifices that were offered at the Temple.

Why does Jesus want to shut down the Temple? He says, You have made it a DEN of robbers.

It has nothing to do with selling things in church! I have heard too many sermons using this text to keep some youth group from holding a fundraiser.

Jeremiah condemns the people for failing to follow God's ways in their daily lives, but then coming to the Temple for safety, counting on God to protect them from being conquered by the latest Empire of the day.)

Notice that Jesus is not saying the Temple is the place where the robbery is happening. **Quite the opposite, the Temple is the place where the robbers are safe - it is their hide out.** So the money exchanging and selling of doves, etc. is not the problem. The problem is that the Temple has become a hiding place for robbers.

How has that happened?

The history is complicated, but basically what has happened is that by the time of Jesus, the Romans have been appointing the chief priest to act as their local agent in Jerusalem. This means that the Temple has become not only the location of the Ark of the Covenant; the Holy of Holies; the single, central, pinnacle of worship; it has also become the headquarters of Roman collaboration.

It would be like Murray First United Methodist making an arrangement with the IRS to collect your taxes and tithe! -- Let's think about that!

Jesus upsets the chief priests as they kept looking for a way to kill him (Verse 18)

3. Now we look at the third incident. **The leaves on the fig tree are withered, down to the roots!** The disciples point this out to Jesus and he tells them to have faith and they can move mountains!

Now let's look at the whole sandwich!

The fig tree was doing nothing wrong and either was the Temple. The fig tree gave the appearance of bearing fruit, the leaves, even though it was not the season for figs. The Temple was functioning as intended, except that some were abusing the safety of the Temple to cover their misdeeds. Jesus curses the fig tree and clears out the money changers.

The story is about religious institutions and religious people who are not what they seem to be! Again, remember that The Way leads to Jerusalem and confrontation. This confrontation would lead to death and resurrection.

But unlike a fig tree, there is no "season" for justice. Justice is always in season. The Temple has leaves (people worshipping) but no fruit (people doing justice). And Jesus shuts it down in a way that is paralleled by his actions with the fig tree.

The image of casting a mountain into the sea should not be taken literally. It is an exaggerated image meant to convey just how serious Jesus has been about having faith / trust in God without ANY doubt or hesitation.

The assertion in Verse 24: "So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have

received it (alternatively, "are receiving it"), and it will be yours," is quite a problem. It makes a promise - "it will be yours" - based on a condition - "believe that you have received it." Too many faithful / believing / trusting people live with the anguish of a heart-felt prayer that was not granted, that they did not receive. Why? The logical answer based on this verse is that they did not believe sufficiently - they hesitated or doubted.

But if we remember that we are eating a sandwich, then we find that Verse 25 has an additional ingredient for our praying - forgiveness. Just as hesitation and doubt cause a break in unwavering loyalty / relationship with God; so forgiveness is the key to restoration / reconciliation. So we could paraphrase Verses 20 to 25 this way:

Begin your praying with a forgiving and forgiven heart. Align your heart with God's heart, so that your desires are God's desires. And then you - and God - will be able to do all that Love has the power to do.

Mountains like . . . broken relationships . . . irrational fears . . . self-righteousness . . . lack of trust and faith.

Jesus is proclaiming the Kingdom of God over the Power of the Empire! He is not compromising his words to make people feel good. Jesus knows there cannot be a resurrection until there is a death.

In the Name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Primary Resource:

Borg, Marcus J. & Crossan, John Dominic. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*. HarperCollins, 2007.

"David Ewart, www.holytextures.com."