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Mark 11:12-21

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The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

“From a Distance” – Bette Midler

From a distance the world looks blue and green
 And the snowcapped mountains white
 From a distance the ocean meets the stream
 And the eagle takes to flight

From a distance we all have enough
 And no one is in need
 And there are no guns, no bombs and no disease
 No hungry mouths to feed...

God is watching us
 God is watching us
 God is watching us from a distance.

From a distance all seems well.

From a distance there is peace...

But when we get close, well that's a different story.

In our passage we have an odd story about something similar...

Good from afar but far from good.

Jesus and his disciples are leaving Bethany and headed to Jerusalem...

On the way, being a human just like you and me, Jesus gets hungry.

Off in the distance he sees a fig tree.

This fig tree is in leaf; full of leaves and maybe full of figs.

Its appearance is impressive...

Things are looking promising from afar.

But then they reach the tree and find nothing but leaves.

We're told that it's not the season for figs.

If Jesus and his disciples were headed to Jerusalem for Passover it would have been sometime in late March or early April...

Yet the figs don't start coming until at least the end of May (Eugene Boring).

So this tree was looking good from a distance, but there was no way it was going to have figs.

It looked impressive until further inspection reveals that there is no fruit.

This tree is promising something it can never deliver.

So Jesus curses the tree, and the next day when the disciples walk past...

The tree is withered...

Destroyed from the roots up, never to come back to life.

Such an odd story at first glance.

We wonder:

If Jesus is hungry why doesn't he just multiply some loaves and fishes?

Why does he curse a fig tree that isn't supposed to bear fruit out of season?

Why does Jesus seem to over react here?

But when we step back, we realize that Mark is using this story symbolically...

He's using this story to illuminate the point he's trying to make with his other story...

He's using the fig tree to help us interpret the story that's sandwiched between. In the middle of the sandwich is the story of Jesus entering the temple and flipping over tables.

This is the temple area.

The whole complex of courtyards and buildings covered around 35 acres.

It's a big space.

So when Jesus enters the temple courts, he's entering this area...not the building with the sacred objects.

(Because he wasn't a priest he wouldn't be allowed into certain areas)

In the outer courtyard, the largest area, was the Court of the Gentiles.

It was here where the business happened.

Vendors set up their stalls in this large area and sold what the people needed:

They sold animals that met the specifications for temple sacrifices;

And they exchanged money for special temple currency.

So we can assume that around the time of Passover the outer court was bustling.

People were probably wheeling and dealing...

Getting set up for the Passover sacrifices and festivities.

From a distance the temple looks promising...

Almost like a fig tree with lush leaves.

Like the fig tree, Jesus is rather disappointed with what he sees.

We're not given specifics but we're given hints of what he's angry about.

After Jesus makes a scene—tossing over table and driving out buyers and sellers...

He says, "Is it not written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a 'den of robbers.'"

These are two quotes from the Old Testament.

The first is from Isaiah 56:

"Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people'...all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in

my house of prayer...for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

We have a vision of God’s house being a house of prayer for all people...

We don’t know whether Jesus was emphasizing the first part of the verse, or the second part:

The “house of prayer...or “for all people.”

But something about God’s vision for his house was being corrupted...

God’s temple—the representation of God’s presence—was being turned into something distorted.

It may have looked good from afar, but it was anything but good.

The second quote is from Jeremiah 7:

“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord.”

Do you think that you can go out from here and break God’s commandments...

And then come back like nothing has happened?!

Everything going on at the temple may have looked good...

The religion of the Jews looked positive from a few hundred feet away...

But up close...underneath the promising appearance...there were problems.

Like the promising fig tree full of leaves...

There was no fruit being produced.

The temple was the place where the people were to encounter God.

It was the place where God’s presence settled in the Old Testament.

It was the place where the people were made right with God through sacrifice.

But now, we see Jesus condemning the temple...

There is no fruit being produced.

Their religion and practices look good from afar, but they are far from good.

And as we know this temple will eventually be destroyed like the fig tree.

We would do well to ask ourselves this question:

How does our “religion” look up close?

First individually:

When people look at you “from a distance” what do they see?

Do they see a tree full of leaves?

A tree full of promise?

And when they get close they realize that there’s no fruit?

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Are these fruits that the Spirit is producing in your life?

Let’s just look at one of these as an indicator:

Self-control.

How do you respond when things don’t go your way?

Where do you turn when life overwhelms you?

You might talk a good game...

Looking from the outside like your religion has given you control over yourself...

But where do you turn for comfort?

Do you rage and abuse people with your words?

Do you turn inward and condemn yourself...heaping guilt on top of guilt?

Do you turn to vices like pornography, drinking, smoking, or other compulsive behaviors?

Things might look good from afar, but only *you* know where you’re at up close...

Be honest, are you a tree full of fruit or a tree just full of leaves?

Now let’s look at us corporately...

As God’s people.

Are we a tree bearing much fruit?

Think back to that Isaiah passage:

“Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say the Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”

Let's land here for a second.

Are we a welcome place for all of those seeking the Lord?

And when I say welcome, I mean do we go out of our way to include all people?

Do we welcome them into our lives?

Not just those who look like us...

Not just those who come from the same family...

Not just those who share our background or talk like us...

But all people.

Those who aren't Dutch...

Those who aren't coming from a Reformed background...

Maybe those who are rough around the edges and hearing about Christ for the first time.

Do we go out of our way to make sure they're cared for...

To make sure that this is a comfortable place for them to encounter the living God?

A place that says “you are welcome here”...

A place that says “We're seeking out God too, let's do it together.”

Let's mature as disciples together.

Trinity is a church that is seeing growth...

From all outward appearances we're lush with green leaves...

But are we *bearing fruit* as Christ's body? (Just a question to consider)

Are we a tree with limbs hanging low to the ground with heavy fruit just waiting to be picked?

And if you're sitting here thinking about how other people are bearing this fruit, maybe this is a challenge to you individually.

Are we a church living out the command of God to reach our neighbors with the saving message of God's love for them in Christ?

Are we a church that is making disciples of all nations?

This is a tough passage to hear.

It challenges *us* as the ones who might look good from far away.

But I want you to view it with different eyes...

Try to seeing it from a different point of view.

Imagine that you are the one who has been wronged by the temple authorities.

Imagine that you are being taken advantage of by the temple priests and Jewish leaders.

Imagine that you are a Gentile...

You are an outsider wanting to worship this God.

But these temple structures and laws put up barriers.

You want to find a place to encounter the God of creation...

But all you find in the temple courts...

The only place you're allowed...

Are business dealings.

People wanting money for this or for that...

Chaos and crowds when all you want to do is worship and pray.

How does this passage sound to those who are oppressed?

To those who don't fit in?

To those who aren't a part of the family?

To those who have been abused by the system?

To them, this passage sounds good...

It brings hope.

To hear that Jesus came into the chaos to shake things up.

Because God is not watching at a distance (as Bette Midler would lead us to believe)...

God is not just watching from far away...

God is right there, making things right...

Going into the midst of the chaos and restoring his order.

Showing his love by coming right into the middle of our mess.

Because it's not just Jesus, some crazy religious fanatic...

Coming into the temple and driving people away.

This is Jesus... God the Son.

The second person of the Trinity.

In Jesus Christ, we have God in the flesh.

“He is the image of the invisible God.” (Col 1:15)

God the Son took to himself human nature to become one of us...

Fully divine and fully human.

He did this so that he would be the one to set everything right.

Unlike the people of the Old Testament and 1st century...

We do not have a temple.

We do not have to go to a certain place to encounter God.

Christ came and replaced the temple.

He replaced this institution that was supposed to bring us closer to God.

And now he comes as God.

Fighting for his people:

For the lonely;

The despised;

The outcast;

The oppressed;

Those enslaved to sin and addiction;

He comes to rescue his people.

He comes to rescue you and me.

Broken, hurting people that we are.

God the Son gives up his life as a sacrifice so that we might have life...

So that we might be put back into the only relationship that makes us whole.

This relationship with our creator.

And not only that...

We are made into a new community.

Because of what Christ has done we are made into God's people.

That's what we did earlier with the sacrament of baptism.

In baptism we point to what Christ did in making us adopted sons and daughters of God.

It's not what we do...

It's not what the parents Harmel and Nicole do...

It's not their commitment...

It's God's commitment to us.

He took the initiative to love and care for us when we were in a big mess...

When our lives were in chaos...

When we were still his enemies he made a way for us to be in the family.

And now by God's Spirit, we become his presence in this world.

We are filled with his heart and his Spirit to love this world:

To work to end oppression;

To comfort those grieving and hurting;

To see people break free from the chains of addiction;

To see people welcomed into God's loving arms;

All by the power of his Spirit working through us.

We may still be sinners...

Maybe we look better from far away...

Like we have it all together.

But we know, as God's children...

That the Spirit of Christ lives in us.

Keeping us in close relationship with God...

And moving us to be his agents and disciples in this world.

Amen.