

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Midweek Lent #2 -- February 13th, 2008

Mark 11:12-14, 20-25

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. 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!”

“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Dear Followers of our Lord and Savior,

Life is full of expectations, isn't it? Your boss expects you to accomplish certain tasks during the day, unless you want to become unemployed. A teacher expects students to be done with their homework. You came to services today expecting to hear a sermon. Life is full of expectations.

As we continue our journey on the crossroads, we see Jesus also had expectations. He had expectations of what he was going to have to endure. He had expectations of others—be it his disciples or his enemies. In today's lesson we find him having expectations of a fig tree. It's his expectations of this fig tree that will serve as a teaching tool for us to see what Jesus expects of us.

The setting for our journey today is Monday morning, the day after Palm Sunday. Jesus had received a hero's welcome the previous day as he entered Jerusalem. But he had not been able to take a look around town before heading back to the suburb of Bethany for the night. Now, on Monday, Jesus and his disciples were eager to check out the happenings of Jerusalem. They headed out early in the morning, probably without breakfast, which is where our lesson picks up. **“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.”**

Upon the first reading, it seems like Jesus woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Why would he curse a tree for not having figs when it wasn't even the season for fruit yet? Wasn't he expecting a little much of this tree? Did Jesus resent Mondays as much as you and I do? To understand Jesus' disgust, we need to know a little bit about fig trees. Fruits and leaves are supposed to appear simultaneously on a fig tree. Therefore, since this tree was “in leaf,” Jesus had every right to expect to find fruit on its branches. But the tree was not what it seemed. And that's what upset him: This tree flaunted its leaves from a distance, but upon closer inspection it was worthless. It was empty. This tree was a hypocrite—good on the outside, worthless on the inside. And so Jesus cursed it. The next day, Jesus and his disciples were once again walking this road from Bethany to Jerusalem when they saw this same fig tree. Peter called attention to it, saying, **“Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”**

So what can we learn from this little visual aid that Jesus used? What can we learn as we walk this particular crossroad with Jesus and his disciples? In our closing verses, Jesus tells us what he wants. What he wants, what he expects, is for us to bear fruit. He doesn't want followers who simply put on a good show. Rather, he expects there to be substance. He expects to find figs. But what is that fruit? What are the "figs" Jesus expects to find in us? Plain and simple, it's faith. On the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, Jesus instructed his disciples, **"Have faith in God."** Faith in God is what Jesus looks for in each one of us. And isn't faith in God what Lent is all about? Perhaps like no other time of year, Lent is an opportunity for us to review just where we stand with our God. On the one hand, Lent leads us to contemplate the seriousness of our sin and how God cannot stand to be in its presence. On the other hand, Lent leads us to contemplate how God dealt with our sin through his Son, that Son who is the cornerstone of our faith. Yes, faith—faith in God is what the message of Lent is intended to produce and strengthen. And faith in God is not dead. It is not withered. Just as Jesus expected figs from that tree bordering the crossroad from Bethany to Jerusalem, you might say Jesus expects "Figs" or fruits of faith from us. But how will faith in God show itself in our lives? The first way he says faith will show itself is in prayer.

Theme: Crossroads – From Bethany to Jerusalem

- 1. Faith in God shows itself in prayer**
- 2. Faith in God shows itself in a forgiving spirit**

I. Faith in God Shows Itself in Prayer

After saying, **"Have faith in God,"** Jesus answered. **"I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."** To get the full effect of what Jesus is saying here, you have to picture the disciples on this crossroad. They're on a steep, mountainous ridge heading west to Jerusalem, which sits about 2,500 feet above sea level. But if they look back to the east, they can see the Dead Sea, which is located 1,600 feet below sea level. Jesus used this view to point out what it means to have faith in God. It means trusting that God has the ability to do anything. He could even throw the mountain they were climbing into the depths of the sea. That's how powerful God is. And it's that unbelievable power that the disciples were connected to through faith in God. And so Jesus encouraged them to show that faith, to tap into that power through prayer. He says that because your God is so powerful, pray with a heart that doesn't doubt. Pray with a heart that believes God can do anything he promises.

But we don't just hear Jesus telling us to pray. Time and time again as we travel with Jesus during this season, we see him praying. In the Upper Room, we see him pray. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see him praying so earnestly that his sweat was like drops of blood. Certainly, one of the things to marvel about Jesus' last week, one of the things to marvel about Jesus' life, is his spending so much time in prayer. And then, when we examine the content of his prayers, we stand in even more awe. We don't find him praying selfishly, "It's got to be done this way. My way or the highway." Rather, we find him submitting to the wisdom of his heavenly Father as he prays, "Your will be done." We don't find him praying only for himself. We find him praying for others—his friends, his followers, and even his enemies. As he hung on the cross, what did he say? "Father, forgive them."

Which leads to another "Fig" that Jesus looks for in us. Not only does he expect faith in God to show itself in prayer, but also in a forgiving spirit.

II. Faith in God Shows Itself in a Forgiving Spirit

Jesus goes on to say in our lesson, **“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”** What’s the connection between faith in God and a forgiving spirit toward others? Let’s think this through. If we refuse to forgive someone, we are saying that people need to atone for or suffer the consequences of their own sins. Right? They have to make up for it. Now, if that’s the case, what are we telling God? We’re telling him not to forgive us either. We’re telling him, “I need to make right for my sins. I need to pay.” And that, brothers and sisters, is not faith. That is not trusting in God to do what he promises. That’s trusting in ourselves to make things right with God. On the flip side, when we do have a forgiving spirit toward others, indicating that we indeed do have faith in God, then look what follows: **“Your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”** Faith receives the blessings that God promises. In this case, faith receives the blessing of forgiveness that God offers through Jesus.

Now just as we talked about in regard to prayer, Jesus doesn’t just tell us to show our faith through a forgiving spirit. He demonstrates what that forgiving spirit looks like. Consider the way he handled Peter. In a few weeks, we’ll hear how Peter denied knowing Jesus. But not long after that, Jesus would assure Peter of his forgiveness by reinstating him as one of his gospel workers. Or think about that thief on the cross. On the one hand, he is sentenced to death on the cross. On the other hand, we hear Jesus forgiving him his sin by saying, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Whether it was to a friend or a foe, Jesus freely and frequently offered forgiveness. As recipients of that forgiveness through faith, may we freely and frequently offer that forgiveness to others as well. That’s the “Fig” or fruit of faith that Jesus wants to find in us.

Now one more thing needs to be said. If faith in God shows itself in prayer and if faith in God shows itself in a forgiving spirit, what if I don’t always see that in my life? What if my prayer life is riddled with doubts? What if I struggle to forgive others? Does that mean I don’t have faith? A wise seminary professor once said, “Whenever I look inside of me for my faith, the little bugger hides.” His point was that in order to answer the question whether or not we have faith, we cannot look at the roadmaps in our hearts. Rather, we need to follow the crossroads mapped out in the Word. These crossroads that we’re traveling lead us to our Savior. Our Savior who prays for us. Our Savior who forgives us. When the Holy Spirit guides us to follow these crossroads, as he is right now, our faith will become stronger and our Savior will see more “Figs” in our lives. Amen.