

“Have Faith in God”

Mark 11:20—12:12 *NRSV*

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New London UMC

Rev. Joyce Rich

That poor fig tree that had leaves but no fruit on it when Jesus was hungry and looking for something to eat, so Jesus cursed it, has now withered away. How does a seemingly healthy fig tree wither away down to its roots in twenty-four hours? Peter took note of this negatively miraculous occurrence as they passed by on their way from Bethany to Jerusalem. But it seems like Jesus just took it in stride because it was what he expected to see. And as he keeps walking he uses this as a teaching point for the disciples. He tells them: “Have faith in God. . . . whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” A withered tree is nothing! If you have faith in God, and have no doubt in your heart, but believe what you say will come to pass, you could tell a mountain to get up and jump into the sea – and it will be done. However, when you are praying, if you have anything against someone, you need to forgive them; so that God may also forgive you your trespasses. . . . So clear out what needs to be forgiven. Clear out any doubt. And pray with total faith in God. . . . A good lesson to fill the time as they walk those two miles from Bethany to Jerusalem.

But this morning as they enter the temple grounds, Jesus is met by the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. They were not a “welcoming committee.” They confronted Jesus because they wanted answers to why Jesus did what he did the day before. By what authority had he sent the money changers and vendors packing? Who authorized him to speak to the Passover crowd? And Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question: answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.” These religious leaders and scholars put their heads together and argued with one another about how to answer Jesus’ question. The city of Jerusalem is flooded with Passover pilgrims – many of whom have received John’s baptism. Many of whom believed John to be a true prophet of God. But the chief priests, scribes, and elders had questioned John about why John was baptizing people when he was neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet. And John had told them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” (*John 1:25-27 NRSV*)

So if the religious leaders now say that they believe John’s authority came from heaven, they think Jesus will then ask, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if they say that John’s authority was of human origin, the Passover crowd could turn against them, and things could get very ugly, very quickly. So they chose to fob off Jesus’ question by answering, “We do not know.” Not a very leader-y way to answer, was it? And since they lacked the integrity of taking a position on the question, Jesus refused to tell them by what authority he was doing the things that he was doing.

We don’t know how many people were in the crowd that morning. We don’t know how many people were sticking around to overhear this exchange between

Jesus and the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. But if we were there, and we saw who it was, and wondered what was going on – we would have hung around to find out what was going on, wouldn't we? We would have been interested in why Jesus seemed to be at odds with these religious leaders, and why this confrontation was going down at the temple. We would have listened to the parable that Jesus told about the owner of the vineyard and his tenants. A parable that was similar to something that God's prophet Isaiah had spoken of long ago:

*Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.*

*And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.*

*What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?*

*And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.*

*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry!*

(Isaiah 5:1-7 NRSV)

We would have also noted Jesus' quote from Psalm 118,

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

(Psalm 118:22-23 NRSV)

We might not have understood EXACTLY what Jesus was trying to say to the religious leaders, because there were a lot of undercurrents going on. And we might have been left questioning if the owner of the vineyard was God, then who would be the owner's son? And is he the stone that is being rejected? And is he being rejected by the murderous tenants? And who are the tenants? And what is really going on here between Jesus and these religious leaders? Because the hateful looks they were giving Jesus as they steamed off without saying anything! Well, if looks could kill – they would have.

This encounter would have given folks in the Passover crowd plenty to contemplate. But what would it have done to the Twelve, to Jesus' nearest and dearest disciples? They are

witnessing – for the second day – how Jesus seems to be deliberately antagonizing the temple authorities. Challenging their authority. Questioning why they are in positions of leadership. Pushing their buttons. Raising their blood pressure. Goaded them on to want to arrest him. To want to kill him. . . . This had to have made Jesus’ disciples anxious and uneasy. Fearful for both Jesus’ safety and their own. Because if Jesus rocks the status quo at the temple too hard, too far, the Roman guard will immediately step in to maintain order and remind EVERYONE that they represent the ruling authority of Caesar. So even if the disciples still harbored in their heart of hearts the glimmer of hope that Jesus will proclaim to this massive crowd that he is God’s Messiah, they know that if Jesus did call upon the crowd to rise up against the Romans – it would be a blood bath. Leading a successful grassroots rebellion during this Passover celebration would be next to impossible. Even if overthrowing Roman rule is still something the disciples long for, they know it is not how Jesus has described the coming of God’s kingdom. . . . But they also still don’t understand how Jesus’ death could contribute anything to the coming of God’s kingdom. . . . What a muddle!

We feel for them, don’t we? Even though we already know about Jesus’ resurrection after his death, we still understand the disciples’ desire for Jesus to be the all-powerful Messiah who will save their people right then and there. We get that because we also want Jesus save us from the oppressive situations and dangerous things that we face today. We want Jesus to show up and put an end to the war between Israel and Hamas, Ukraine and Russia, to end senseless gun violence, to stop the horrible things that people do to each other, to bring peace to our world RIGHT NOW. We want Jesus to do it! We don’t want to be reminded that we are some of the many stones that need to be aligned with him as the cornerstone, so God can build a house of peace in this world. We WANT Jesus to do it ALL. But as disciples of Jesus, as members of the Body of Christ, we know that we have to do everything WITH each other and WITH Jesus. Even when what we have to do is incredibly difficult, we still have to follow Jesus’ lead in what we are to do. . . . That’s as true for us now today as it was for the first disciples that day in at the temple in Jerusalem. May we have faith in God and be faithful.

Amen.