

WHAT IS OUR FRUIT?

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Text: Mark 11:12–14

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.

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God of our many layers of history, of our ancestors, and of gratitude and giving, this Church community gratefully acknowledges that we are on the sacred traditional territory of the Dakota people. It is an honor to live, pray, seek justice, and create community alongside Dakota, Ojibwe, and other Indigenous people in the Twin Cities. Amen.

As we approach this upcoming Thursday of gratitude, I am looking forward to my favorite food part of the day: my father’s pecan pie. I really do like the pie for its own sake, but more importantly it is filled with memories and the love of a parent . . . through the mighty pecan. Robin Wall Kimmerer edified me on the biology and indigenous history of the pecan tree in her beautiful book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. She tells us:

The word *pecan* . . . comes to English from Indigenous languages. *Pigan* is a nut, any nut. The hickories, black walnuts, and butternuts of our northern homelands have lost their own specific names. Our lands around Lake Michigan were wanted by settlers, so in long lines, surrounded by soldiers, we were marched at gunpoint along what became known as the Trail of Death. So much was scattered and left along that trail. Graves of half the people. Language. Knowledge. Names. When they got to Kansas they must have been relieved to find groves of nut trees along the rivers—a type unknown to them. . . . Without a name for this new food they just called them nuts—*pigan*—which became *pecan* in English.¹

These trees now-called pecan reproduce in a way that is still not fully understood, called “mast seeding” or just “masting.” This is “the production of many seeds . . . every two or more years in regional synchrony . . . [which is effective because] the seed predators become satiated before all the seeds have been consumed”² Kimmerer explains:

If one tree fruits, they all fruit—there are no soloists. Not one tree in a grove, but the whole grove; not one grove in the forest, but every grove; all across the county and all across the state. The trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective. Exactly how they do this, we don’t yet know. But what we see is the

¹Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015), 12–13.

²“Mast Seeding,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/science/mast-seeding> (accessed November 22, 2021).

power of unity. What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together. All flourishing is mutual.”³

Think about this if you end up eating pecan pie this week!

These pecan trees came to mind when I read this submission for our “Command to Preach” series. I am grateful to have been able to bookend this series this fall, and next week begins our season of Advent. Jackie Lotsberg offered this passage about Jesus condemning the fig tree for not having fruit. This passage certainly is tricky. Jesus is hungry, sees a fig tree with leaves on it and seeks a fig. He is then upset that there are no figs, even though it states that it wasn’t the season for figs! So, he condemns the tree saying to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And then we move on.

Jackie rightly said to me in our correspondence: “The thing is, I think I am more than a little ticked off that the Son of God should blast a fig tree because there were no figs. What’s that all about?” Yes indeed, Jackie, what *is* that all about?!

Often when a story doesn’t make much sense on its own in the Bible, the first place of investigation is in its placement. In Mark, this fig condemnation occurs immediately after the story that we typically associate with Palm Sunday, where Jesus rides through Jerusalem while people shout “Hosanna” and lay cloaks and branches on the ground. The next day Jesus decides to curse a fig tree. This still feels kind of random, so what happened next?

Immediately afterwards, Jesus and his followers go to the Temple. It is here that Jesus famously became angry. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers, knocked over the seats of the dove-sellers and disrupted all of the Temple business saying, “This house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers.” It is at this point that his execution plans were set in motion because “they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.” (Mark 11:15-19, NRSV)

Here we have some resonance with two side-by-side examples of anger, one metaphorical and one narrative. They are likely set side-by-side because the fig tree can be used as a stand-in for the Temple. Both Temple and tree are alive, one has leaves and the other is full of people. Neither are empty or dead. Yet, neither Temple nor tree are bearing any fruit despite their aliveness. Just because something is living doesn’t mean that it is producing something of meaning and goodness. The passage mentions that it was not time for figs, just like it was not yet time for the Temple to produce something of meaning and purpose. The Temple didn’t stop its commerce just because Jesus disrupted it for a bit. It was not yet time for the fruit to be produced. Jesus felt as if both the tree and the Temple had corrupted their reason for being; they were both alive but no longer healthy, and he cursed them both in hopes that this corruption would cease. He knew there was another story to tell, one that could bear the fruit of love and caretaking for the most vulnerable. It is this fruit of God, for the benefit of all living things, that Jesus wished to propagate, not the corruption of transactional relationships that benefit those with the most advantage.

That’s my understanding of this little passage, Jackie. What’s this all about? My best interpretation is that it is a metaphorical companion story to the anger in the Temple. It’s about what we do with the holy lives and holy spaces that we care for. I hear it asking us something: What kind of fruit do we bear, and should we keep bearing it?

So, Church, I turn this question back on us. What is our fruit here? What fruit does Plymouth Church create? We are certainly alive; our leaves are green so to speak. We have a busy building and a staff that

³Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 15.

is working at or beyond capacity. We have lovely people in the pews and watching broadcasts from home. This tree is alive!

What is our fruit? Maybe you have already noticed, but this is on the mind of your ministers recently. This wasn't coordinated, but each of our last sermons have turned these questions back on you all.

Two weeks ago Beth implored us to be "a church willing to put the needs of others before our own desires... [and] become the kind of community...that models to the world a different way of engagement, of problem solving, of loving one another far beyond the walls of this paneled house." She concluded by setting in front of us an enormous and necessary question: "What kind of temple will we build, Plymouth? What Church will we be?"

Last week DeWayne reminded us that church "has been used to re-enact and reinforce the oppressive norms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Not so long ago, for the sake of order, Black people had to be segregated from white congregants; LGBTQ people had to be celibate or excommunicated; and women had to be silent and rejected for ordination. But the church is supposed to be different."

And now I ask this church: What is our fruit?

Your clergy are asking you some big and important questions right now, and we are hopeful that you are not just listening but seeking answers along with us and with each other. You have called the three of us to be your ministers, but we are not the church. You are the church. Like the Living Tree art project hanging in Guild Hall, it is your hands that are the living leaves here. This church is alive because of you.

But what is our fruit?

I don't believe that we are like the Temple with its transactional nature, hierarchical power, and permanent caste systems, *and* I know that many of us are feeling weary and in grief, which can create a silence and an apathy that can seed the things we are seeking to avoid. We have a chance right now to respond to Beth's question about what church we will be with clarity and energy. We have chance to live into DeWayne's reminder that the Church is supposed to be different. We have the opportunity to continue creating something that eschews our society's calculations of worthiness and be a place where all feel the love of God and community. What is our fruit?

I wonder if we can be like the pecan and practice mast seeding. Every day we are rooted firmly in the ground, in this neighborhood, in this city. We provide shelter and care for living things day after day. And yet at some unpredicted season we produce so much fruit that it overwhelms. We erupt in love showing ourselves, each other, and the world that we are all capable of something different, something rooted in the abundant love of God and not the scarcity model that is our empire's greed. Our fruit has not been cursed if it is done with humility, mercy, curiosity, and love.

We do not do this alone. We have been wisely told that "all flourishing is mutual." You are hearing your clergy ask you to sit in some big important questions. The leadership and boards and other active members of Plymouth are all seeming to be building energy and thinking anew about old questions. There seems to be something going through the root systems of our communities reminding us that it is time for our fruit. There may be some compassion justice pheromones floating on the wind telling us churches that it is time to overwhelm the world with our fruits. All flourishing is mutual.

We are about to enter into a week of intentional gratitude. May you identify all the blessings that you carry and name your gratitude and build upon that abundance. And then it is time for the expective time of illumination when we go on an Advent journey of discovery together. And when we return in the new year and I invite us all to participate in the making of our fruit for the goodness of our communities. If you see something you want to be a part of, we will help you join. If you notice gaps that need to be filled or things

that are missing, come and help us construct newness with love. This masting will take all of us—all stages of life and time commitment abilities—and it will not always be easy (can you imagine birthing thousands of nuts?!). But this work can be life-giving, and we can model what kind of world we wish to live in and show that it is possible.

I am grateful for you all individually and collectively. I am thankful for all our ancestors that have built the trunk of this tree that we keep alive. I am grateful to be here with you because all flourishing is mutual. May we overwhelm them with our fruit.