

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday, January 14, 2024 – 10:00 a.m.
Sermon: Fig Trees, Trust, and Sacrifice
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scriptures:

Mark 11:12-14, 20-24

12 On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 13 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. 14 He said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it. 20 In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. 21 Then Peter remembered and said to him, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.” 22 Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. 23 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. 24 So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

John 1:43-51

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” 46 Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” 48 Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” 49 Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50 Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, [a] you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Sermon: Fig Trees, Trust, and Sacrifice

Jesus references fig trees a lot. Everything written in the Bible has a purpose, even and especially Jesus’ apparent interest in fig trees. For Jesus, the fruit of a fig tree was a metaphor for the fruit of the person or group he was associating with the fig tree. In Mark 11, Jesus gets so mad at a fig tree that he curses it to die – this is a metaphor for the fruitlessness of his community to trust and love God through their impending crisis.

In John 1, Jesus emphasizes to Nathaniel twice that he saw him under the fig tree. The metaphor here is that the fig tree was healthily bearing fruit, and he equates those spiritual gifts with Nathaniel as His reasoning for calling him.

It's clear based on this fig tree theme that Jesus identifies fruits of the spirit in those He calls and lets go of those which don't show potential to offer fruit. So how do we identify people and places that bear promise and potential, and let go of places that don't? What is the litmus test of seeing the difference?

When I was working at UCC National in Cleveland, I had the unique opportunity to witness the models of hundreds of churches and what worked and what didn't. A big part of my job was to create grants for churches that were hosting refugees or offering refugee ministry programs in their buildings, review the applications, and award funding to successful ministries. I had to determine the viability of the ministries being presented and decide whether the denomination wanted to invest in those ministries.

The number one most common red flag I looked out for in an application is if the church seemed to be applying for money to just make themselves feel good and didn't have a sustainable purpose. I've preached before about the dangers of Sponsorship Dependency, which is when a church provides a ministry to a poor or needy population that results in the subject becoming dependent on the charity of the church, which does nothing to help that person and can actually put them in danger. When we give stuff to people in need without a purpose, then the purpose is actually to make ourselves feel better, which is selfish at best and cruel at worst.

We can reason that the purpose of handing someone a bag of food without a broader missional program is so they don't go hungry, but doing that creates a survival mechanism for that person in which they become dependent on the handouts of others to find food, instead of finding a sustainable solution for themselves. It makes the church feel better, like they've done something good that day, but it doesn't do anything to resolve the recipient's overarching crisis and instead holds them in a pattern of dependence on charity. This is not bearing good fruit, and Jesus would curse that tree – which is why I always rejected applications that looked like this at UCC National.

Alternatively, churches that demonstrated soul searching and investigated the honest impact of their ministries and outreach received awards from the program I administered. I witnessed a lot of churches that were thriving because they had spiritually invested themselves in the work they were doing. These churches knew that their purpose was to transform lives and save souls, not just to feel better about their day because they provided a handout.

Our denomination is generally failing because of its departure from this central mission of transforming lives and saving souls. The UCC often opts to do the easier thing in fruitless social activism and small, meaningless acts of charity. While the evangelicals are in jails praying with the incarcerated, or in tents at the beaches sharing a meal with

a homeless family (with them, not to them), UCC churches often opt to do everything they can except be in intensive relationship with the people they're trying to save. For example, people experiencing homelessness generally don't care what terminology you use to talk about them, whether it's "unhoused" or "homeless." Homeless people do care if you show them respect and love on a real, personal basis. Making disciples and saving souls is about relationships, not semantics or handouts. Language choices and charity can help facilitate our connections, but they can't be the primary purpose of our outreach.

The fruit that Jesus is looking for is the willingness to trust Him to transform lives through your discipleship. All Nathaniel said in response to Jesus was recognition that he was the King and the Son of God. Transformation of the soul through belief in Jesus is the goal of our work. Any objective that's different than proclaiming God and inviting others to follow Him is not ordained by God and will wither and die.

I took this church because it demonstrated commitment to following Jesus faithfully into transforming lives and making disciples. When I opened my search process, I very specifically didn't want to pastor a church that wanted to do something easier than forming discipling relationships and therefore continue stagnating into decline, as many churches in our denomination do. Through my work at UCC National, I've gotten pretty good at identifying fig trees that were in the process of withering up and dying, and despite your declining numbers, this didn't look like one of them.

I didn't take this church, however, just because our mission statement says that we lovingly welcome disciples into relationship with Jesus. A lot of declining churches have this same mission, but they're missing a crucial component: the sacrifice of discipleship. Being a disciple of Jesus comes at a major cost. Historical records tell us that Nathaniel was flayed to death with a whip for his faith in Jesus. Most of Jesus' apostles died in these gory ways for their faith in Him.

The good news is we probably don't have to be crucified or flayed to death as a result of our discipleship, but we do have to honor the sacrifices of our predecessors by making sacrifices and leaps of faith of our own. Churches that opt to do acts of meaningless charity or march for the rights of a people they don't even interact with in any integritous way do those things because it's easy. These actions are a safe way to say that We've Done Something without really doing anything; it's a cheap way to live out your faith. When you're done with your activism march, you get to go back to your normal life while the people you're marching for are still suffering whatever oppression is holding them down. When you're done with your food handout, you get to know where your next meal is coming from, but the people you fed will still need to find food again tomorrow. There's no risk involved at all in these short-sighted solutions to social problems. These ministries offer no sacrificial investment of diving into the world of the lost, the people we seek to save in Jesus' name.

Intentionally investing in relationships, and forming ministries to sustain those relationships, is much harder than providing handouts or shouting in a crowd. It involves risk and sacrifice to make a nurturing space that invites true intimacy and connection, because it requires us to be vulnerable. Truly loving other people requires much more effort than just writing a check or attending a lecture. Donating and advocacy are tools to help us facilitate loving connections, but they don't replace the sacrificial commitment of accompaniment and relationship. Loving other people can and often involves pain, disappointment, and struggle. Just as you would be more inclined to closeness with a person in your life who shows up through thick and thin, God is more inclined to closeness with those who dedicate unbridled commitment to Him.

I took this church because you all said yes to diving into the sacrifice involved in being disciples and creating disciples. You said yes to committing yourselves to this vulnerability during my interview process, and then you said yes again when you almost unanimously agreed that you wanted to keep the church alive instead of handing it over to another church or nonprofit. There's not going to be any easy ways of doing this, because it very specifically is not meant to be easy. You've got all this incredible love for Jesus and each other in this church, but you need to add the willingness for risk into expanding your outreach to accomplish the goal you have to keep this church alive.

Jesus identified good fruit in Nathaniel, knowing that he would both say yes to trusting Jesus' Lordship and also knowing he would defend that trust all the way into the sacrifice of his own life. Jesus cursed a fig tree representing distrust that God would deliver for those who believed.

Small, safe performances of faith like mindless charity and yelling in a homogenous crowd demonstrate a distrust of God's abundance. These actions don't require the sacrifice that tells God that we're all in, that we're willing to do what it takes to follow Him into a new beginning. They don't require the uncertainty and vulnerability of entering into a loving relationship with other people or with God. Those fig trees will wither and die.

Jesus asks you if you trust Him enough to take that leap of faith and are willing to follow Him into vulnerable relationship with Him and others to create disciples for His Kingdom. Discipleship requires sacrifice and a trust that any sacrifice dedicated to Him will bear fruit of the Spirit. I don't know if the future of this church is dependent on any plans I've made for it, because I'm just a human being – but I do know that scripture tells us that the future of the church is dependent on how much trust you're willing to put into that fig tree to make it bear fruit.

We need to say yes to following Jesus into vulnerability and risk. We need to say yes to willingness to sacrifice for His Kingdom. We need to say yes to trusting that He will provide for us, and we need not be afraid.

Amen.