

### Mercy for the Fig Tree

Sermon by Robb McCoy

When I was thinking about the fig tree that didn't bear fruit, I suddenly remembered a story about my friend's pawpaw tree. The pawpaw is native to Illinois and can bear a delicious fruit, but the fruit is rare because they have to be pollinated with another pawpaw tree, and pawpaw trees were not planted in many of the urban/suburban developments in Illinois.

I thought to myself, maybe the fig tree is like the pawpaw. It needs another tree around it to bear fruit. That sermon could write itself. We need each other to bear fruit. Alas, a fig tree is one of many kinds of fruit trees that do not need a mate to pollinate. As I was studying the pollination and fruit-bearing patterns of fig trees, it turns out fig trees need a lot of care to bear fruit. According to an online writer who calls himself the Fig Boss, you need just the right kind of pruning, not too much water, and well fertilized soil. It turns out, getting fruit from figs doesn't always come easily. So in the story Jesus tells, it makes sense that the gardener would want another year.

Mercy for the fig tree means that the one who is struggling is going to get extra attention, not the axe. While conventional wisdom might be to cut it down in the name of efficiency, the Kingdom of God is not built on efficiency. In a world where everything is valued by its production, Kingdom values are different.

Jesus values vulnerability, and this is the common thread through today's passage. It starts with Jesus dispelling conventional wisdom, and detaching tragedy from sin. "Everything happens for a reason," is not a Biblical concept. While finding explanation for tragedy can be reassuring, life is actually much more chaotic and unpredictable. This leaves us in a place of fragile vulnerability that makes people uncomfortable.

That vulnerability, however, forces us to accept each moment as a true gift. Nothing is promised. Human evil and accidents happen - but not because God wills them to happen. We are left to treasure life because of our very vulnerability. Embracing the chaos of life should leave us with an appreciation for the incredible joy we can have. Life is a gift, and embracing vulnerability is the only way to truly enjoy it.

*The Pawpaw tree has large, simple leaves with drip tips, more characteristic of plants in tropical rainforests than within this species' temperate range. Pawpaw fruits are the largest edible fruit indigenous to the United States.*

*There are some in Rock Island, with a few actually giving fruit, which is sweet, with a custard-like texture, and a flavor somewhat similar to banana, mango, and pineapple*



Later, when Jesus hears that Herod wants him dead, Jesus embraces the vulnerability again. He doesn't try to avoid anything or shy away from the trouble. His response is increased resolve. He stands up to the fear and continues toward Jerusalem. Remember the last time we heard of Herod, we found out that he killed John the Baptist, and Jesus' response was to feed the Legion, but then withdraw and pray. Here, he learns of Herod's plans, and he continues his march to Jerusalem - not with the power of an army - but with the power of a community of love and healing.

Finally, he laments about Jerusalem. He knows that they will reject him. Like a parent who wishes that their hug could chase away all the sadness in their child's life, he wishes he could show them the things that lead to peace. Alas, he knows rejection is coming. Jesus continues to lean into vulnerability.

Vulnerability is a fundamental part of love. With no vulnerability, there is no love. Without risk of rejection, there is only coercion. Empires enforce loyalty with lies and threats. Jesus reigns over the Kingdom of God with love and vulnerability.

My friends, vulnerability is scary. Embracing chaos, standing up to threats, and genuine lament are a part of how we go on together. We are all called to be the gardener. In the face of life that seems fruitless and barren, you and I are the ones to bring the nutrients of grace, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and generosity. We can make the fig tree blossom if we embrace the vulnerability and love that Christ offers. We are the gardeners. We can help the world bear fruit.