

From the Fig Tree Learn Its Lessons...
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December 2, 2018

Over the summer of 1962, my sister and I had the privilege of joining other college students on a tour of Europe. Before we linked up with the group, we ventured out on our own, driving through England west and south of London. Abandoning the prescribed schedule after the first day - which was pretty brave of 2 naive young ladies from Kansas - we arrived on the end of a day having literally run out of land. The road stopped in a barren stretch with the Atlantic Ocean lapping at the bottom of the cliff. Fortunately, one of the few houses was a Bed and Breakfast. We checked it out and checked in. After dinner, the sun was low on the horizon. Oh, how fun, we thought we'll perch on a large rock and watch the sun sink over the edge of the world. Well, even our life around endless fields of wheat did not prepare us for the impossible challenge. Do you know how far out the ocean goes at that angle of the earth? I actually don't know, but what I do know is that sun outlasted us. How could open space be that large, that vast? That night I realized one effect of unknown space on me. I felt small and frankly, "out of land", beyond the amount of trust inside of me. Open and unknown can do that, can't it? Push us to our edge?

The same realization can also come with the openness of terra-firma beneath our feet. Or to use another's words: "Whatever else prairie is—grass, sky, wind—it is most of all a paradigm of infinity, a clearing full of many things except boundaries, and its power comes from its apparent limitlessness; there is no such thing as a small prairie any more than there is a little ocean, and the consequence of both is this challenge: try to take yourself seriously out here, you bipedal plodder, you complacent cartoon. William Least Heat-Moon (1991, *PrairieEarth* (p. 82)

Yet, not all open spaces occur in nature. Each of us know times in our lives when our world, measured inside us or in inches or miles is a vast unknown. Daily news stirs up questions and concerns. Familiar landmarks seem cloaked in fog, or even worst, we fear are being dismantled. We feel powerless. We fight despair. Our list of "unknowns" is longer than we can remember.

Using images and scenes from his own day, Jesus speaks to such a world and time in our gospel this morning: "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken." Whatever prompted Jesus, he is obviously speaking to the human experience of having one's world - inside, outside or both - rocked to its core. Not even the cosmos is exempted. Not even what seemed in his day to be unchangeable - the sun, moon, and the stars - are outside the effects of some unknowns.

Given what we know about the political, religious, economic and scientific realities of Jesus' day, his dire picture must have been scary. Whatever comfort we take from our current degree of knowledge of why tsunamis, forest fires, hurricanes are more frequent and destructive, that knowledge was unavailable to them. Imagine seeing the scenes of a wall of fire rapidly approaching or the brutal force of seawater rising before crashing on the shore with 1st century eyes. The unknown and the unknowable rolled into one.

Yet, surely Jesus' images and words aren't meant to simply increase panic or despair for he goes on. "From the fig tree learn its lessons...". Doesn't it seem oddly placed to you? "From the fig tree learn its lessons...". It doesn't make sense. On one hand, Jesus paints visible chaos, urgency, cosmic in scope, potential disaster of unpredictable and uncontrollable world. Then, he points to the fig tree. A familiar, small part of nature. The contrasts between Jesus' two images are so stark as to make us pause, to stop us in our tracks.

Maybe that's exactly what Jesus means to do: to stop us in our tracks, to redirect our path. At least that's what Jesus' mention of a fig tree did for me. He shifted my attention and that attention change was enough to change everything. It became impossible for me to keep thinking of possible dire consequences when I focused on the fig tree. And the changes didn't happen simply in my mind. My body felt different. Tight muscles relax. My heart beat slower and my breathe deepened. As I stayed there, wondering about the lessons of the fig tree, I was moved to another space. This space is just as vast and as unknown as the space of oceans and prairies.

By placing the image of a fig tree before us, I believe Jesus is directing us to the spiritual space within. It is from this space that we learn to live through the unknowns around us. Reaching from our depth, we can trust more fully in the constant, underlying presence of God's energy of love. We trust life is connected by a vast web, ebbing and flowing, endlessly and abundantly from love, in love and back into love. Hidden and mysteriously, it is these lessons from the fig tree that truly grounds and sustains us. These lessons from the fig tree won't fix the unknowns outside of us, but these lessons change us, how we manage, how we choose and how we live from the love, hope and peace in depth of our own spiritual unknown.

Advent is a time to learn and practice the lessons of the fig tree. In some ways, it's a perfect time. Could there be a more frantic, frazzled time than the weeks leading up to Christmas? Between our own internal expectations of ourselves and those society places on us, our personal Richter's earthquake scale is at the high end. A good time to practice the lessons from the fig tree.

If not, now, when? How about practicing at the beginning of each Sunday worship in Advent? As you noticed, there is a change in our liturgy this season. Yes, as usual, the "Collect for Purity" gathers us in prayer, but this season we are praying it together. "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open.....". Many of us know it by heart, but until a few years ago, it was just a beautiful, traditional prayer to me. I had no idea that it's actually a prayer map able to lead us to our own vast spiritual unknown where we learn the lessons of the fig tree.

So I invite you to open your bulletin to the prayer map and let's trace the map together. First, like the fig tree, we need to find a time and space set apart to ground our roots, to pay attention to our inner space "to open our hearts." In our inner vastness, we let our thoughts come, whatever comes, we can let all of all that gathers in that space. "...all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid... "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts...". We let the thoughts, all thoughts go. We are cleaned. We don't attach or cling.

Daily, we practice resting in the love of the Holy Spirit which is, of course, how and why this prayer map works. "By the inspiration of your Holy Spirit....". It all happens because of God. Like the fig tree, God constantly holds us in love's and life's flow. We're not "doing" anything. God is giving us

our “being”. “...that we may perfectly love you and magnify your holy name...” which is another way of saying “We’re not “doing” anything. God is giving us our “being”.

From the fig tree learn its lessons: learn and live from our depths, trusting what is unfolding, even when we are uncertain and times are dark. Or in the words of Teilhard de Chardin: “There is something afoot in the universe, something that looks like gestation and birth.” Amen

(Everything Ablaze by David Richo, page 127).