

“Figs and Flourishing”
Mark 11:12-24

Six days ago we began a new year. Some of you were awake when the clock struck midnight and thus watched the ball drop and fireworks ascend. I, on the other hand, continued my long-standing pattern of reading about such events the next day. With either approach, 2019 arrived on our planet and accompanying it, some diverse traditions for marking the occasion.

My childhood family always used to have a meal on January 1 that included black-eyed peas, a custom that feels quite boring when compared to other cultures. In Spain, for instance, I understand it is tradition to eat 12 grapes—one at each stroke of the clock at midnight—to represent good luck for each month ahead while in Colombia, residents carry empty suitcases around the block, perhaps hoping for a year of adventure. When the calendar turns, citizens of Denmark throw old plates and glasses against the door of family or friends while in Panama it is common to burn in effigy well-known tv characters and political figures; in both lands those acts are designed to drive out evil spirits. In Greece, an onion is hung on the front door of homes on New Year’s Eve and the next day starts with parents waking their children by tapping them on the head with that same vegetable. (Wyland, Sarah “9 New Year’s Traditions From Cultures Around the World,” www.worldstrides.com/blog/2016/12/9). While in our region, of course, persons will mark the transition with the clanging of pots and pans followed by the annual spectacle of the Mummers Parade. Lots of different traditions and all of them difficult to explain!

Still, one of the pieces accompanying a New Year that surely happens around the world is the way a calendar change naturally leads one to look back and look ahead. In some cases, the end of one year is met with a sense of “good riddance” while for others there’s a feeling of deep nostalgia for its special moments. For others still, the previous twelve months can be seen as quite ordinary with nothing good or bad of note having occurred. Still, in all cases, a New Year provides us with an opportunity to ponder what we learned and anticipate what is to come.

On this first Sunday in 2019, I want to start that process together by reflecting on the year at DPC just concluded and the one just begun. I’m not speaking of using our time as a kind of annual meeting to lift up all of the wonderful moments that happened last year in and through the people of this church. Nor am I inviting you to write out predictions for the coming months, seal the note in the church safe, and open it on the first Sunday of next year to see how we did. Either approach could be fun, but I want to ponder with you a unique aspect of our life here that began last January and will conclude in December of this year. I’m speaking of our Flourish initiative.

Flourish marked an entirely new approach for our congregation in its effort to be faithful stewards of God’s blessings. For decades prior to 2017, the pattern at DPC had been to have an annual stewardship campaign where our members were invited to reflect on God’s abundance in their life and then make an estimate of giving for the following year. Those pledges provided the financial resources for all of the day-to-day ministries of our church—worship and education, service and fellowship, mission and upkeep. Whenever our congregation would undertake a significant capital project—repairing the steeple or upgrading the organ or adding the stairwell to my right—there was a separate campaign seeking over-and-above giving for that cause. The renovation efforts that concluded in 2011 included two such campaigns stretching over 8 years.

Flourish was different in that we asked our members to make a two-year pledge to support all of DPC’s ministries—everything that happens in and beyond these walls and, for the first time in the operating budget, our renovation loan payments. A talented team of members came together to help educate and inspire the congregation. For a detailed refresher of the plan

that emerged or if you have come to our church since, I would encourage you to check out the wonderful resources for the initiative which can still be found on our website. We provided you with our best estimate of anticipated expenses for 2018 and 2019--knowing that things could change—and the commitment to use any remaining funds to enhance our ministries and make additional payments on the loan principle. All of that planning and praying resulted in a Sunday fourteen months ago when 409 households offered their best estimate of how they would respond over two years. The giving officially began last January and thus, this morning, want to look back at what happened in the first year of Flourish and then next Sunday to what is ahead.

To help in that effort we start, as always, with Scripture and in today's case by focusing on one of the most unusual moments in Jesus' ministry. Our reading from Mark opens with events from Monday of Holy Week when Jesus and the apostles set out from Bethany for a short walk to Jerusalem. Before that day ends there will be a dramatic moment when Jesus drives persons out of the Temple for turning, in his words, "a house of prayer for all the nations," into "a den of robbers." Bracketing that memorable scene, is an odd encounter with a fig tree.

Mark tells us Jesus was hungry as he set out that morning and spotting such a tree in the distance, walked over hoping to find some fruit. Upon arriving he sees that while leafed out, there are no figs. The gospel writer informs the reader that was to be expected since "it was not the season for figs"--typically from late April until August. Despite that agricultural norm, though, Jesus, in a moment of pique says to the tree "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."

After the drama in the Temple and a night of rest of Bethany, the group passes along the same route on Tuesday as they walk back toward the city. On seeing the tree from the previous day Peter says "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." Jesus answers "Have faith in God." He tells the group that if they were to say to a mountain "Be taken up and thrown into the sea" that it would occur if they do not doubt. "So I tell you," he concludes "whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

It's a hard scene to understand and mostly because Jesus seems to act out of character. Elsewhere in the gospels there are clear times he refused to use power for his own sake as he would not turn stone into bread during a time of great hunger or offer signs on demand or save himself from the cross despite the ability to have done all of those things. Yet in our text, in a moment of finding a fig tree without fruit, his hunger leads him curse a tree and it dies.

Now, if we were to play junior psychologist, we might wonder if the strain of a week that will end with his death is beginning to show. The way that Mark tells of the encounter with a barren tree and then has Jesus show equally-uncharacteristic anger upon entering the Temple could suggest his anxiety was growing. That is possible given what we know about the ways that tension for us or loved ones can surface in unusual ways, too. We don't know if that was the case with Jesus nor is our primary response to Scripture meant to be one of psychoanalysis.

Still, I do think the way that Mark has the events involving a tree surround the drama in the Temple suggests a clear link. The commentaries I studied all see the withered tree as a symbol for ancient Israel and the fruitlessness shown by the leadership who resisted Jesus. Furthermore, the way our Lord reacts to the tree's demise by speaking of the power of prayer offers a clear contrast between the Temple practices that had made him so angry and what God wants from you and me. Thus, one scholar concludes, "Since Jesus points to the power of faith as the meaning of the incident, it is not some power possessed by himself alone, but he and the believers share the role of being vehicles of the divine power." (Boring, M. Eugene *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII*, Nashville: Abingdon 1995, p. 408) In other words, trusting in

God and praying to God are options for all of us and when we act in such ways, the power of God is revealed. Twelve months here with Flourish has demonstrated that truth once again.

On Commitment Sunday fourteen months ago, those 409 households pledged a total of \$3.8 million dollars, the highest multi-year campaign total in our congregation's 215 years of existence. It was a wonderful response and, in keeping with DPC tradition, you have been exceptionally faithful in your efforts to honor those intentions. Through the end of December, total gifts received from those who made a pledge is just under half of the full amount for two years while total revenue was nearly \$2 million. What amazing generosity and faithfulness! Those gifts have enabled us to fund fully all of our day-to-day ministries, including nearly \$200,000 of mission efforts outside these walls. They permitted us easily to pay our mortgage payments for the last twelve months and in March, allowed us to make a prepayment of \$100,000 on the principal. And teaser alert-there is more good news to come on that front!

Yet beyond the dollars are the uncountable ways that ministry at DPC has flourished because of what you have done. Read through any bulletin or newsletter and you get a snapshot of our efforts to grow in grace and knowledge, in compassion and generosity. Your gifts have made that possible. Because of your faithfulness last year, new ministries began and long-time ones were strengthened, a Strategic Plan was developed to shape our future and first steps toward fulfilling it got underway and 45 individuals became part of this church family. Your faithfulness allowed me to step away for a 15-week sabbatical and even better, let me return, and during our time apart you heard sermons from eleven persons who expressed their profound gratitude for the ways you had shaped their ministry across our denomination. There is no way to total up the impact of DPC upon the larger church through them, yet what remained visible and clear here throughout the first year of Flourish was your hospitality and your courage, your time and your tears, your dreams and your commitments. In the imagery of our text, there were no withered fig trees, but instead clear evidence of what can happen when we place our trust in God anew.

What comes next? We'll speak to that question a week from today, as on this morning we stop to give thanks for the life we know in one who cursed a fig tree long ago, and then taught us of what can occur when we place our prayerful trust in God's purposes. Or as he put it "whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." We have seen it, friends, yet again.