

**Fearless, Cheerful Extravagant Living**  
**Matthew 21:18-22; 24:32-35**  
**Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, October 5, 2008**

These two linked passages are a curiosity. Jesus, hungry after orchestrating a momentous day's work, curses a fruitless fig tree, which then withers and dies.

The day before he entered Jerusalem hailed as a king but then caused a commotion in the temple by turning over the tables of the money changers accusing them of turning God's house into a den of thieves. When the chief priests and scribes, the absolute rulers of the temple, demanded he cease and desist, Jesus stood firm and refused to recant his authority to challenge the religious establishment.

Keep in mind the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree happened during Holy Week, just days before his crucifixion. He was determined not to go out with a whimper, but a bang, by making loud denunciations of the insipid religious life and practice that emanated from the temple. Simply put, Jesus was crying out loud, "Enough is Enough! No more stale religion, God wants you to trust and obey his will and vision for the world." To emphasize his point Jesus cursed that poor fig tree.

The day after Palm Sunday Jesus "...returned to the city, (and) was hungry. And seeing a fig tree...he went and found nothing but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the tree withered at once." (Matthew 21:18-20) When you put this story of Jesus curing the fig tree in the context of his mounting frustrations with organized religion it stops being a curiosity and becomes a powerful action parable that warns us of the consequences of shallow, lukewarm religion. Today, at the request of your Session, I'm preaching a stewardship sermon encouraging you to continue being good financial stewards, generously supporting our annual stewardship campaign and our three-year Vision Campaign.

You've probably noticed you haven't been getting weekly mailings this year, you've only received one letter with your pledge card which you can return to us on October 12 which is next Sunday. This stewardship campaign is intentionally low key for several reasons.

First, you are proven faithful givers. Every year, because of your support, we always meet our budget. Thank you for your consistent faith giving over the years and for next year too. You always come through.

The second reason: This year the economy has been flat and during these past few weeks we've all held our breaths waiting for the politicians to clean up their and Wall Street's mess that led to the present financial crisis. Time will tell if things calm down, but in the meantime we're all nervous, so why add to the anxiety with a full scale campaign?

The third reason: Many of you are also giving over and above your annual giving to our three-year Vision Campaign. Our records show some of you are hard pressed at this time to keep up your annual giving and the extra giving to the Vision Campaign. Again, your Session didn't want to overwhelm you with weekly requests because, after all, through it all, you always come through.

Even so, it's still essential I preach a stewardship sermon based on the biblical teachings stressing faithful and sacrificial giving so here I go:  
You know this already, Christians are not supposed to give off the top, from our leftovers; instead we should boldly respond and give generously. It was the Apostle Paul who wrote, "God loves the cheerful giver" and he exhorted his churches to "give liberally." But how can you be cheerful and give liberally or extravagantly while our nation faces this financial crisis of huge proportions?

Maybe we can get inspiration from that poor, withered fig tree by taking a closer look at those two separate but linked passages from Matthew's gospel, because the lesson learned can transform our hearts and change our behaviors.

Why did Jesus curse the fig tree? Because like the "religious" leaders who were turning the people away from God, the fig tree, though it looked healthy with its thick, green leaves bore absolutely no fruit. What good is a fig tree, to look pretty or produce figs? A grove of leafy fig trees without figs is worthless, and a financial disaster for the owner. Might as well cut them all down!

The same can be said of religious people who are scrupulously religious, saying their prayers, reading their bibles and singing their hymns, but if their religion produces all leaves but no fruit, what good is it? If religious people enrich themselves with religious information, then fail to act on it, so what?

Unfortunately the scribes and Pharisees were oblivious to their spiritual illness. They acted the part, but they didn't live by faith. Blindsided by their superior knowledge and time-honored traditions, they memorized the scriptures in their heads, but the information never melted their hearts. They couldn't climb down from their ivory towers long enough to abandon themselves to a lifestyle of sacrificial giving, giving away their time, talent, and yes even their hard earned money, with no expectation of getting back anything in return.

We need to remember the Pharisees and their foibles because, like it or not, we are them. We too are religious people who need a reality check that keeps us in sync with Christ and his Kingdom. We need to admit our spiritual poverty and abandon ourselves to the cheerful discipleship/stewardship lifestyle. Why? Not just to support the institution, which is important, but especially to enrich your own life which is even more important. Christian givers are both cheerful and extravagant only because you have allowed yourself to submit yourself to Jesus and his love. You give cheerfully and

extravagantly because you let God reveal to you that secret hidden joy that comes from knowing God's great and awesome love for you and all humanity.

If you're still struggling to become a cheerful, extravagant giver because the spirit is willing but your flesh is weak, maybe we need to remember what Franklin Roosevelt declared in his first inaugural address when our country was in the middle of the Great Depression. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." When you think about it, isn't it a common sense approach to all the things we fear? But we need more than just common sense. We especially need a Word from the Lord, for example St. Paul's revelation, "God's love casts out all fear." Consider that: When you let God love you, there's no room for fear. God's love makes you bold and strong and empowers you to trust God just enough to recommit to being faithful disciples and good stewards. If you let him, God can overcome your fear of not having enough left over for yourself, allowing you to become a fearless, extravagant, cheerful giver of your time and money.

I have a spiritual exercise for you. This morning when we celebrate Holy Communion I encourage you to remember the biggest risk taker and extravagant giver who ever lived. Remember Jesus who gave himself to us so we can give ourselves back to him.

Also remember this: God doesn't just want you to give abundantly, but to live abundantly. God wants you to be so enveloped in his love and grace that your time and money stops being symbols of success and security to becoming gifts you can give to God. You know what it's like to give a special gift to someone you love. Even though it costs a lot, the act of giving was a pleasure. You became a fearless, cheerful, extravagant giver. If this has ever happened to you, guess what? You have the potential to be the same with God, giving back to God and experiencing the joy and pleasure of his love.

One more thing: you give your tithes and offerings not just for the good of the institution, not even just for your own good, but for the glory of God. Unfortunately the Pharisees and Priests didn't get it, so their religion became self-centered and self-righteous. But those who do get it experience the joy of being alive.

Ask God to help you become fearless, cheerful, and extravagant and especially become alive in Christ our Lord, whose great love empowered him to great sacrifice for us and our salvation. Let's now approach his table confident his love will do the same for us.