

## ***A Fig Tree and a Mustard Seed***

No one knows how hard it is for her to move her body. It's been eighteen years since she was crippled; she is bent over and is completely unable to stand up straight. For eighteen years this unnamed woman must strain to see the sun, the sky and the stars. For eighteen years she has become accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward - not without difficulty.

She comes to a synagogue. We don't know how and why she comes to that place, but we do know that this woman is where people gather together to be instructed in the Torah, to hear God's teaching and seek a way of life as people of God. She is there long enough to be found by Jesus.

She doesn't ask for help from him. She doesn't come up behind him to touch his clothes, expecting him to heal her illness, and no one petitions Jesus on this woman's behalf. That is strange, considering Jesus is a very famous healer. Over the years, maybe this woman has become accustomed to her long and serious illness, to her isolation, to being shunned. No one questions her fate – nobody asserts her right to be healed. There is nothing to draw attention to her – just one woman, quiet and alone, in a crowded, noisy place. And yet- Jesus sees her.

Jesus is concerned about this one woman. Notice how he heals her. Even with the bustle of a busy synagogue, the distractions of the crowd, the pull from his disciples as they try to steer him back to his teaching, he sees this woman. He calls her over and says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment", and he lays his hands on her. Imagine how he sees this woman, and how he feels about her. Jesus is so present to her that he can heal her. He changes her life from despair to hope.

Today's story lies between the parable of the fig tree and the parable of the mustard seed, just as that one woman's life itself was between the fig tree and the mustard seed.

The parable of the fig tree goes like this. 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down!" The gardener replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." '

The fig tree is native to the entire Near East and it grows exceptionally well where Jesus lived; it produces fruit almost ten months of the year. So a barren fig tree would be very unusual to the audience, just like it is very unusual to God that his people do not welcome his son. In this parable, Jesus identifies himself as a gardener who asks the owner to give the tree one more chance, with a condition that he will nourish the tree. That is an invitation to nurture ourselves with Jesus' love and guidance.

Think about a fruit tree. It doesn't produce fruit until certain conditions are met: it has to be deeply rooted in soil, and it needs sunshine, water, manure and years of good growth. When we see a tree that produces lots of fruit, we know that everything the tree needs is working together for good. When we see a tree that produces no fruit, we know that something important is missing.

That's what Jesus is trying to say to us through the parable of the fig tree. He invites us to look at ourselves and ask if we are healthy enough, not only physically but also mentally and spiritually, to do good things. A tree can survive on its' own – it can even bear fruit, but in the long term, a tree needs a gardener's care to reach its full potential. We need a gardener, too, we need to say to Jesus, 'I lack something, so I need your help, your wisdom, your guidance and love.'

It is interesting to contrast the woman who was crippled for eighteen years with the leader of the synagogue. He was indignant because Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath. He was just quoting the rules, straight from the Ten Commandments: No work is to be done or allowed on the Sabbath, because the people of Israel need to remember their relationship with God and everything God has done for them. That's

the letter of the law: No work on the Sabbath. But the spirit of the law might be expressed as this: The Sabbath is not just for resting, but for connecting and deepening a relationship with God. Jesus did exactly what needed to be done on that Sabbath.

I think the leader of the synagogue needed healing too, because he did not recognize that God was working through Jesus. The crippled woman was physically crooked, but the synagogue leader was spiritually crooked. After the woman received Jesus' healing touch, she stood up straight and began praising God, and the entire crowd rejoiced, except for that one man, who saw no cause to rejoice, but to rebuke. She turned out to be like a mustard tree, he was like a fig tree with no fruit whatsoever.

Jesus says, 'the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.' It's just amazing how Jesus talks about the extraordinary using ordinary things that most people take for granted. Just like that, the Kingdom of God is within us already, but not all of us experience it.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say that the kingdom of God is like a mustard tree; instead he says it is a mustard seed which needs to be taken and sowed by a gardener. The difference between the leader of the synagogue and the woman is whether they are willing to be connected to Jesus, whether they are willing to trust their gardener, or bind him with rules and limitations, doing their best to keep the gardener from making any changes at all.

We are like the woman bent over and unable to look up and see the sun. We know only the dust and dirt underneath our feet. Like her, we struggle to see the path before us. Like the fig tree, sometimes our life looks fruitless. Yet, we come to worship God with our mustard seeds, our tiny faith and hope. And those seeds, as small as they may be, are big enough to be found by Jesus and nurtured in the love of God. They will continue to grow until they are so big, so evident, that everybody will rejoice at all the wonderful things that God is doing in our lives.