

*Jesus Curses the Fig Tree*

You sneeze, and someone says, “Bless you.” You sit down to Thanksgiving Dinner, and someone says, “Who’s going to say the blessing?” You have a stretch of bad luck, and, to cheer you up, someone says, “Count your blessings.” We use words like “bless” and “blessing” frequently and in a multitude of situations. But what exactly is a blessing? How do we define the word “bless?”

Certainly a “blessing” can be a kind of prayer, specifically a prayer invoking God’s favor on some item. I have read that the custom of saying “God bless you,” often shortened to just “Bless you,” when someone sneezes comes from a time when people thought that a sneeze was your soul exiting your body through your nose, and your friends were praying for the safe repose of your soul when saying “Bless you.”

I have always thought of a blessing prayer as involving both a giving of thanks for something, such as thanking God for the food we eat, and also asking God to insure that the whatever it is He created serves its purpose well for us, for instance, that the food we eat might make us strong to serve God in His Kingdom. There’s the old chestnut about the Sunday School teacher asking a little boy if he says a blessing before he eats and he says, “No, I don’t have too, my mom’s a good cook!” Sometimes, as we will see, the act of blessing calls upon God to even go beyond something’s natural purpose and to use that item, whatever it may be, in an extraordinary, maybe even supernatural way.

Throughout history the church has blessed a variety of things. Traditionally, the oils used in church rituals are blessed on Maundy Thursday. We bless animals on St. Francis Day. The Assembly of God Church in Murrysville has a huge event each year where they bless motorcycles. And I have seen historic video clips of Russian Orthodox priests blessing Soviet tanks that were going off to fight the Nazis in World War II. How's that for some disparate images!

The act of blessing itself can take several different forms. Blessings can merely be spoken. Frequently, items are blessed by making the sign of the cross over them or by anointing them with oil. More rarely in our tradition, items can be blessed by censuring them, which is perfuming them with the smoke from burning incense. Perhaps not everyone would agree that inhaling incense is a blessing!

But the things that we consider gifts or favors from God we call "blessings" as well. We say that wealth and wisdom are blessings. Notice how blessings also carry with them responsibilities. In the wrong hands a potential blessing could be something not so good. I must confess that I am always a little uncomfortable counting blessings. In the competitiveness of our fallen human nature we might be tempted to think of ourselves as more deserving than our neighbors if we have more blessings, or we might think that God is unjust if we have less. It seems to me to be a good idea to recognize that God has blessed each and every one of us, but to not get too obsessed with numbering our blessings. They are probably too many to actually count anyway.

In our typical Sunday worship service there are several parts of the liturgy we call blessings. Children are brought to the altar rail to receive a blessing. After Holy Communion the pastor blesses the congregation. And, most prominently, the bread and wine of the Holy Communion are blessed. Blessing the elements of the Holy Communion is a special kind of blessing called “consecration.” To consecrate something is set it aside for a holy purpose, to set it aside for use in God’s church.

As you might have guessed, Jesus often talked about blessings and actually blessed things, including people. Jesus blessed the children that were brought to him. In the Beatitudes he names a number of groups of people that are blessed, such as the peacemakers and the persecuted. And Jesus blessed the loaves and fish, and fed more than 5,000 people. That was a unique supernatural blessing, foreshadowing the blessing, the consecration of the bread and wine at the Last Supper, which is the institution of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for us.

Given that Jesus, true to his nature, was all about blessing, it comes as a shock to us to read that Jesus cursed anything at all, especially a poor, defenseless fig tree. What could possibly be going on there? First, we need to say what a curse is. In many ways a curse is the opposite of a blessing. To curse something is to invoke God to injure or harm someone or something. To curse is to wish or to cause evil to occur. The opposite of a benediction, meaning to bless, is a malediction, meaning to curse. Curses can take the forms of words, and in the occult religions there are rituals involving objects and actions that are said to bring about curses.

There is a quite a history of cursing in the Bible – and I am not talking about people using foul language. In Genesis we read that after Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the serpent, so that he would slither on his belly and eat dust his whole life through; he cursed the ground, so that it would not yield its produce willingly for Adam any longer; and he cursed Eve, so that her pain in childbirth would be multiplied but her desire would still be for her husband. Thank you very much Adam and Eve!

In numerous portions of The Law of Moses a curse is invoked on whomsoever breaks God's law. Curiously, in Deuteronomy it says that whoever is hanged on a tree, that is whoever is crucified, is cursed. The thought behind that idea being that for anyone to be punished with such a horrible death must mean that person had put himself beyond the reach of God's blessing. There are many references to curses and cursing in the Old Testament, but suffice it for now to say that in the books of the prophets curses are threatened for both the nation of Israel and her neighbors for not following the Lord.

Let's consider then what was happening in Matthew chapter 21 verses 18-22. It was the day after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the first Palm Sunday if you will. Jesus is drawing close to the time of his death and resurrection. Jesus had spent the night in relative safety outside Jerusalem in Bethany, but now, on Monday morning, he is headed to the Temple, the epicenter of Jewish religious and political life during Passover week. On the way, Jesus, apparently hungry for breakfast, approaches an innocent looking enough fig tree, he reaches in to pick some figs, and he comes out empty

handed. All that was there were leaves, no fruit. Then, in a totally uncharacteristic action, Jesus curses the fig tree and it withered at once. At first glance this may seem like just a crude display of power on Jesus' part. It appears to an action done in anger. You might wonder why Jesus' followers would choose to remember such an unflattering story and preserve it for posterity in the gospels.

Being the "functional literalist" that I am in regards to the Bible, I believe that this story actually happened more or less as reported by Matthew and Mark (their accounts differ slightly), although the point of the story is obviously symbolic. Commentators and Bible scholars have debated endlessly over whether or not it was the season for figs, and how could Jesus not have known there were no figs on that tree having lived around fig trees all his life. Regardless of such nuances, that we will never quite understand because we don't live in first century Palestine, there are some things about this story that are plain.

Jesus expected fruit and found none. The tree appears to represent the nation of Israel, and perhaps more specifically the Temple in Jerusalem. God's people should have submitted to God's gracious rule. But their hearts were hardened. They rejected Jesus, God's anointed one. They should have recognized Jesus as Messiah. They should have produced the fruit of faith. Instead, they insisted in having their own way. For that, their privileges were revoked and shared with the gentiles. For that, the Temple itself would be destroyed. For that, they were cursed. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is an analogy acted out in real life with the Temple hierarchy being overthrown for their unbelief. Later in Matthew's gospel Jesus would foretell the

destruction of the temple and indict the scribes and Pharisees more directly so that when these events came to pass, no one could doubt that he had predicted them.

In an incredible plot twist in the story of our salvation, Jesus, who cursed the fig tree and cursed the temple, winds up hung on a tree, he winds up crucified, which was considered by the Jews the most accursed fate possible. Then, wonder of wonders, Jesus was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, and we came to understand his death and resurrection as the promise of eternal life for all who believe and are baptized. Out of the greatest curse came the greatest possible blessing.

That Jesus would curse anything is hard for us to believe, but it happened. We are blessed beyond our ability to comprehend in that Jesus took on the curse we deserved for our sins and died in our place we might share in his blessing. Thanks be to God. Blessed be the Lord. Amen.