

“LIVING A HUMAN LIFE”

Matthew 25:35-40; Matthew 21:12-19

August 29, 2021

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

That story about Jesus and the fig tree has to be one of the strangest scenes in the gospels. I really don't know quite what to make of it. I can't tell you for sure why Jesus did this, or for what purpose Matthew (and Mark as well) chooses to include it in his gospel. Is it a miracle story? Sort of? Well, not exactly.

One possibility is that it's a kind of enacted parable about the importance of bearing fruit; that is to say, of showing your faith by some tangible evidence in your life and behavior. Luke doesn't include this story in his gospel, but he does relate a parable Jesus told about a tree that didn't bear any fruit, even after lots of patient attention, and so was eventually cut down. So that might be a reasonable interpretation of Jesus' action, especially following his angry reaction to the corrupt practices he's seen in the temple – where he might have expected to see evidence of godliness instead.

Still, when we are reading the gospels with a particular focus on what Jesus is like, our minds aren't on such symbolic or theological points. What stands out most is that this just doesn't seem like something Jesus would do. In fact, all I could think about when I first started contemplating it was that this seems like something *I* would do, not something Jesus would do!

Well, I wouldn't curse a fig tree. I actually have a fig tree. I bought it from the farmer's market this summer, and it's a really sweet little tree. It even has a few tiny green figs growing on it. I *hope* I don't curse it by not watering it properly or something like that. I'd really like to eat those figs. I'll be disappointed if they fall off before they get ripe, or if they get eaten by critters. But it won't be a matter of being hungry, so I doubt I'll have a reason to actually curse the tree. However, I've certainly been known to curse the office copier, or my computer, or a stuck zipper, or a jar lid I can't get off, or... well, you get the picture. Never mind that I'm usually well aware that the problem is as much with me as with the maligned object. I guess maybe this is human nature.

But it's not quite what we expect to see from Jesus, is it? But if the story is to be believed, it would appear that even Jesus could get a little cranky when he was hungry. Not unlike us. But we don't think of Jesus as being *just* like us... so there's a dissonance here.

Could it be our expectations that are off?

We tend to think of Jesus in rather more ... *spiritual* terms. He is Savior, God's Son, Redeemer, Messiah, Intercessor. He is the sweet baby in the manger, God with us. Or he is the perfect sacrifice on the cross. Or he is the risen Lord. Some of us may think of Jesus in a very personal way as a divine, ever-present friend and helper who loves and comforts and helps us. Or we think of Jesus as a gentle and wise teacher of important truths about God and how we should live.

Different as they are, all those most common ways of thinking about Jesus share a certain abstractness, an idealized concept of this person we follow.

So it's easy to lose sight of the fact that Jesus lived a real flesh-and-blood life, with all the limitations, risks, struggle, pain, hope, pleasure, and joy of being human in a particular time and place and culture. I don't think it's surprising or wrong that we have abstracted from his life those things that have the most meaning for us; but Jesus' humanity is a really important part of the story, too.

I've always read those verses from Matthew 25 - I'd guess we all have - as a lens to help us see other people, people in need, as God would have us see them. The larger parable (of which we just heard a little part) asks us to see Jesus in the hungry, in the oppressed, in the people around us who lack the basics they need to live. Jesus knows that people who are comfortable tend to see the less fortunate as less worthy, when we see them at all. But to see Jesus in a hungry person, and feed that person, as if feeding Jesus... that's a changed perspective. And an important one.

But what if we flip the point of view around? I never thought of it this way before, but consider the parable from Jesus' point of view: What's happening is that *Jesus* is identifying with the hungry, the oppressed, people who lack their basic needs. Jesus is aligning himself with the most vulnerable, with those who need help, with those who are despised or ignored by others.

Maybe he knew what some of those deprivations were like from personal experience. Maybe he had seen enough of poverty and suffering to understand the harsh existence some people endured. Maybe he understood that simply by being a human being in the world he was at some risk for hunger, thirst, sickness, imprisonment, or any of the dozens of things that can go wrong in anyone's life.

Despite the pictures we have in our minds, Jesus didn't float through the world, serenely untouched by its messiness and somehow separate from the human condition.

If we pay attention, we can find quite a lot of detail about this throughout the gospels.

Jesus experienced hunger, as Matthew tells us. When he met the Samaritan woman at the well, he was thirsty and asked for a drink; we're told that he experienced thirst on the cross as well.

After long days traveling, teaching, and healing, he was tired and needed to rest. His feet got dirty from walking the dusty roads.

Jesus wept when a close friend died. He was frequently moved by compassion for someone's suffering.

All four gospels tell us about Jesus' angry reaction over the money-changing in the temple (not only a profanation of a holy place but also probably a scheme to make money at the expense of the people who came to worship). And that's not the only place we see Jesus react in a heated way: he has quite harsh things to say to respected religious folks who don't display much genuine faith or compassion for others, things like "woe to you, hypocrites!" He even calls them "snakes."

Jesus expressed disappointment and frustration when those closest to him didn't understand him. He felt hurt when his friends couldn't stay awake to pray with him, and betrayed when they ran away and Peter pretended not to know him. He suffered pain when the Romans arrested and tortured him. He was so injured or weak he had to have help carrying his cross. As he faced death, he felt abandoned by God.

Life is more than struggle, though; it's filled with pleasures and joys as well, and Jesus knew those experiences, too. The gospels mention more than 20 occasions on which Jesus was present that involved the sharing of food... and meals or food feature in quite a few of his parables as well. When he turned the water into wine at the wedding party in Cana, it wasn't just any wine, it was good wine. So it seems reasonable to surmise that Jesus appreciated good food, and enjoyed eating and drinking with his friends – and he had friendships with both men and women. He evidently enjoyed conversation with all sorts of people. He was a compelling storyteller, and I can just imagine him, like all good storytellers, watching his audience's reactions closely. He seems to have liked children. He loved his mother.

None of this takes center stage in the story very often. And there is a lot we don't know, a lot to wonder about. But these many separate details, taken together, give us a picture of a life that, like ours is made up of lot of everyday moments and ordinary activities, the meeting of needs, interactions with others, getting from place to place sensations and feelings, pain and pleasure. A human life.

Christians believe that Jesus was divine, that he was the presence of God among us. Equally we believe that he lived a truly (not just a “look alike”) human life.

A human life is an embodied life.

A human life is an emotional life.

A human life is a relational life.

A human life is a vulnerable life.

Our particular question today is: What does it mean for us, in terms of following Jesus, that he lived this kind of life?

Here are a few thoughts:

Because Jesus lived a human life that was an embodied life, we should question so-called religious views that denigrate the human body, fear sexuality, dismiss suffering or pleasure or both as unimportant, or insist on separating what's “spiritual” from the “merely” physical. It's true that Christianity has often presumed this dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, but that was infused, quite early on, from Greek philosophy. It doesn't come from Jesus, who shared with us the experience of walking the earth in a human body. That in itself should be reason enough

for us to honor our bodies, and to see the responsibility of care for our own and others' health as an expression of our faith.

Because Jesus lived a human life that was an emotional life, we should resist the very destructive misconception that to be Christian, to have faith, is to have a sunny disposition all the time. There are things in the world that should outrage us. Everyday something happens to break our hearts. Life disappoints us. People hurt us. Depression and anxiety are real illnesses, and people of faith suffer from them. Frustration is normal. Grief is part of life. Yes, our faith can and does help us to have peace in the midst of all this. But Jesus didn't feel he had to banish or cover up all the negative emotions; so why do we? Like Jesus, we would be better equipped to care for one another with more honesty and less false positivity.

Because Jesus lived a human life that was relational, we know that we, too, need other people. Individualism, self-interest, the myth of self-sufficiency, private spirituality, even the idea of "personal salvation" are not part of the human life defined for us by Jesus. All his teachings and stories presumed a community as context. He lived as part of a community. If this is how Jesus understood himself, why wouldn't community, and taking care of each other, be paramount for us still? There's something very wrong when people who say they follow Jesus are more interested in their own rights than in what's good for their whole community.

Because Jesus lived a human life that accepted vulnerability, we can let go of the pressure we sometimes feel to be strong. We don't have to hide our weakness or hurt or sadness behind a façade of self-control. We don't have to compare ourselves to others. We don't have to pretend to be something we're not. We don't have to prove our worth through constant busyness or productivity.

Jesus needed rest, and so do we. Jesus needed help, sometimes. Jesus didn't separate himself from hurting people. He didn't shield himself from getting hurt. He didn't conform himself to others' expectations. He said what he had to say, even at the risk of being misunderstood – which he often was. He loved the world, and didn't withdraw that love even when it was met with rejection.

Jesus' unwavering love for the world and the power of healing he carried with him came from God. But his ability to reach us with that love and power came from his willing embrace of human vulnerability. Maybe our ability to receive that love and power only comes in vulnerability, too. Certainly it's only in embracing vulnerability of our humanity that we are able to follow Jesus and live in a way that brings grace and healing and justice and hope to others.

I still don't know what to make of Jesus and the not-so-uplifting "miracle" of the fig tree. I guess it is a good reminder that I need to accept Jesus – not as I want to idealize him, but for who he is, as he does me – even though I may not always understand.

But I have learned something else about fig trees. They are extremely resilient, and sometimes, even when it looks like fig tree has been killed off by winter cold or lack of water, even when it shows no signs of life for months... it will recover, and slowly start to grow again. Put out leaves. Maybe even bear fruit. I can't help wondering if Jesus knew that. Amen.