

The fig tree and the wasp

Growing up in Brooklyn living in and surrounded by predominantly Italian neighborhoods fig trees and grape vines were and still are plentiful and usually can be found together. The grapevines sort of take care of themselves, but the fig trees are carefully planted and tended. In the fall the owners would cut back the branches wrap the tree in tarp and plastic, put a bucket over the top of the tree and hope that the winter would not be too brutal. The amazing thing I learned over the years is that fig trees are hearty trees. They grow tall and wide such that one can sit and rest under their shade.

My paternal grandmother did the same for her fig tree. Each summer, especially on the fourth of July, the entire family would gather to celebrate under the large sprawling grape vine which was wrapped around a trestle to create a shelter of sufficient size to accommodate a good number of children, grand and great grandchildren. I recall watching carpenter bees drilling holes in the beams that supported the grape vine. Vegetables from the garden graced the table; peaches from the tree soaked in wine were served. During the summer when our family would visit sometimes I watched as grandma tended and weeded around the fig tree and other plants and flowers. Her strong knowing hands worked with ease among yellow jackets and wasps. It seemed she never got stung, or if she did, we didn't know it. It seemed a mystery to me how she did this. We learned from her important farming lessons: No bees—No flowers. No yellow jackets not only No squash but more gnats. No fig—wasps no figs. You see fig trees can only produce fruit if the specific kind of wasp for that tree is present to pollinate the tree.

What does this have to do with today's gospel you wonder? To begin with there is nothing easy about today's gospel. It is neither easy to hear or to understand or preach for that matter. Both the opening verses and the parable that follows seem to catch us off guard. There is a sting in both Jesus words and silence about real time events and then another sting of challenge in the parable.

This dialogue and parable takes place when Jesus is drawing near to Jerusalem for Passover. Along the way he moves from town to town and the numbers of those following him are swelling. Israel was expecting their redeemer to come soon and destroy their enemies and restore Israel's freedom. Jesus responds to the report about the Galileans whom Pilate killed and offered their blood with sacrifices in an unexpected way. First he speaks of an incident where some people who lived in Jerusalem were killed when a watchtower fell on them, not act of aggression or violence. Then he takes the discussion in a completely different direction and His response is rather stinging. Rather than engage in a discussion about a rebellion against Rome. He turns the conversation to our rebellion against God. He says "they weren't the worst sinners," implying that they are not without sin, and that the cause of death doesn't have anything to do with someone's innocence or sinfulness. But, he

doesn't leave it there. He takes things one step further and says to his listeners; "if you don't repent you will perish too!" These are not the words his listeners wanted to or expected to hear. His listeners wanted him to justify a rebellion against Rome. His words sting, if both those killed by violence or by an accident end up perishing what does this mean about how we are to live our life today?

Jesus goes on to underline his point about needing to repent, to change by offering a parable of a Vineyard owner who expects the fig tree to produce fruit and over years is repeatedly disappointed to find no fruit. The parable is simultaneously disturbing and hopeful. A few more fun facts from the garden: It takes about 2-3 years for a newly planted fig tree once pollinated by wasps to begin producing fruit. In Jewish law the owner of the fig tree must offer all the produce from year 3 to God. Only in year 4 may the owner benefit from its fruit. The owner cannot even benefit from the fruit until there is first crop that is given to God. It seems that the owner's impatience is justified. Even so, the gardener pleads for more time another year before a fatal fell of an axe is laid to the root of the tree.

Jesus took on himself the sting of sin in his redemptive suffering and death. By his victorious resurrection he defeats death once for all. Accepting him as our personal savior we cannot perish. What is left to do if the greatest deed has already been done by Him? This question leads us to consider the question of where we are spiritually as we enter the midpoint of the Holy Season of Lent. As we move forward in the second half of lent I offer a few questions for reflection:

- What is the connection between our chosen Lenten discipline this year and bearing fruit next year?
 - How would each of us like to be different, more the person God created us to be a year from now?

- Do we accept or avoid the necessity of wasps in our lives?
 - How can I learn to appreciate the necessity of wasps in my life as life giving?

- Will we allow Jesus to tend our souls that we might bear fruit that will last?
 - If not now, when?