FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"FRUIT IN EVERY SEASON"

Scripture Lesson: Mark 11: 12-14

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 25, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Mark 11: 12-14

Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

12 *On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.* 13 *Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.* 14 *He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.*

Fruit in Every Season

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Most of us learn early in life how to manage our expectations. Some set them quite high, expecting a great deal from themselves and others. The joke, of course, being that those with high expectations are not on speaking terms with reality. Conversely, some set their expectations quite low and don't expect much. After all, they know the world and its people. And perhaps in accordance with Murphy's Law, they anticipate that the checkout line they choose will always end up being the longer one; they don't trust the weekend weather forecast, because they know that it has about as much of a chance of being right as it does being wrong. Low expectations, some will say, simply increase the likelihood of being pleasantly surprised rather than let down.

No matter how we set the bar of our expectations, it can end up looking like a high jump bar or a limbo bar, or something in between. Indeed, so much of our life is spent negotiating that fine line between expecting too much and not expecting enough. I dare say, though, that setting low expectations is not always a matter of being realistic. Sometimes, many times, it is about not wanting to disappoint ourselves. More to the point, it is about resigning ourselves to the idea of disappointment. When it comes to people, institutions, and even the culture around us, why should we expect things to be different?

If we have lived at all, we know how our expectations can leave us wanting; they can leave us fatigued, and if we are not careful, they can lead us to a quiet loss of faith. This morning, our Old and New Testament lessons, each in their own way, testify to this phenomenon, and they invite us to consider the sometimes subtle, yet very real, spiritual danger of expecting too little.

Imagine standing at the kitchen sink and washing the dishes, and right there in front of us is a window — a window we've looked out at a thousand times. And we know what's out there: the same street, the same houses, the same trees, the same neighbors passing by walking the same dogs. My point is that because everything is so often predictable, we begin to think we know exactly what we will see. What's more, the more

we look out our life's window, the more we begin to lose something of our curiosity; we lose something of the hope and expectation that things will be different.

Our Old Testament lesson opens with the prophet Samuel, seemingly more than a little bit discouraged. Samuel had done everything God asked of him, and the people knew this—they affirmed as much—but the patterns of life continued to look the same. God's Spirit had earlier come upon Saul, and God had used Samuel to anoint him as king. But as Samuel watched, Saul grew predictable in his unfaithfulness, and the people were no better. What Samuel continued to see, day in and day out, was a disheartening lack of faith, and by the time we reach 1 Samuel 16, Samuel is grieving. The Lord says to him, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel."

God then sent Samuel to Bethlehem, and to the house of Jesse, to find and anoint a new king. And so, Samuel does what any reasonable person might do: knowing the new king would be one of Jesse's sons, he lined them up and started evaluating them. Eliab walks in first: tall, strong, and commanding — and when we look back at the way Saul was described, Eliab's description sounds similar. In fact, he looks like he's right out of central casting for what a king should look like. Samuel thinks, surely this is the one. But God says, "No." Then another son is paraded in front of him, and then another, and another. Seven sons passed before Samuel, but God chose none of them as king.

And then comes one of the most important lines in the Old Testament: "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Soon, the final son of Jesse, whose name is David, is brought in from the fields, from the sheep, from the margins, and God says, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Clearly, what the world saw was a shepherd boy, but what God saw was a king. More to the point, what God saw was a future that no one else could see. Friends, this is classic Reformed theology at its best, because what we see through that window of ours is incomplete at best. We see in that mirror dimly, as the Apostle Paul has said elsewhere. We tend to focus on human potential and readiness and what we know about the world around us, but God sees more, and expects more.

In our New Testament lesson this morning, we encounter one of the most curious scenes in all of Scripture: Jesus is hungry, and he sees a fig tree in leaf, and he approaches it in search of fruit. But Mark tells us plainly, almost bluntly: "It was not the season for figs," which immediately raises a fair question: Why would Jesus expect to find fruit at a time when there shouldn't be any? At first glance, this whole episode feels a little nonsensical, almost unfair — cursing a tree simply for abiding by the natural order of things.

The tension eases, however, once we realize this story isn't as much about growing seasons as it is about both identity and integrity. I say "identity" because in the Bible, the fig tree is often a symbol for Israel. And that makes a big difference for how we understand this passage, because it means that Jesus was not upset with the plant per se, but with the spiritual condition of his people, the Church. I mentioned that this was a story not only about "identity" but also about "integrity," because in the ancient world, while the vast majority of fig trees produced fruit during a specific season, there were a few rare species of fig trees that bore fruit out of the normal season, certain fig trees that produced fruit when most other fig trees did not, and one of the obvious ways to identify those trees was by their well-developed foliage.

It makes us wonder: could it be that when the Bible says, "Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf," that would have been an indication to Jesus that, having seen such outward signs of life — the appearance of vitality — he was justified in approaching it if it had fruit? This makes even more sense when we consider that

Mark interjects Jesus' cleansing of the temple after his encounter with the fig tree and before Jesus and his disciples pass by the tree the next morning, only to see that it had withered and died.

So, we take a moment to consider what happened in the Temple that day. Perhaps first, we need to know that the Temple complex was divided into four parts. There was the outer court, where Jesus turned over the tables, known as the Gentile Court, which was huge, probably upwards of five football fields long and three and a half football fields wide, roughly 35 acres, and that was just one quarter of the Temple complex. There was also the Women's Court, the Jewish Court, and the Holy of Holies. We also need to know that when people came to Jerusalem to make sacrifices, they didn't always bring with them the animal that they were going to sacrifice; they would often buy it once they got to the city. The historian Josephus tells us that in the year 66 AD, at the time of Passover, 255,000 lambs were slaughtered in Jerusalem. Those lambs cost money, and oftentimes that money needed to be exchanged, and there was a high, arguably extortion-level rate for that. Part of the point I am trying to make is that we can begin to see just how profitable this was for the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin.

We sometimes mistakenly think that when Jesus turned over those tables that he was interrupting worship, but that's not what he was doing at all. What Jesus was doing was disrupting the ways that the "holy" people of God were putting on a show and pretending to be holy — pretending to be about the business of God — when all the while, what they were really doing was making God's house a den of robbers.

So, back to the fig tree. The people of God have made it a point to look like they are something special — they have all the leaves, all the beautiful foliage — but they don't have the fruit. And I dare say, even if hypocrisy was not Jesus' chief criticism of that fig tree, there remains the matter of Jesus' expectation for finding fruit.

You see, Jesus is angry, but he is also heartbroken, because those who should have been full of life and faithfulness had become like a barren tree, devoid of the fruit that faithful living produces. Friends, it doesn't matter to Jesus what everyone else says. It doesn't matter what the world expects. It doesn't matter that just about everyone else who looked upon that tree would have expected to find nothing. Jesus' life and ministry is consistent on this point: he refuses to let barrenness have the last word. He will not stand for it, which brings the story closer to home, because Jesus expects fruit — not from trees, of course, but from people. And yet, consider how often we stop looking for it. We look at the world around us, and we see pain and violence, and fear and suffering, and we become so desensitized to it that not only does it not surprise us anymore, but we begin to expect it.

And this happens in our own lives as well. Maybe we stop expecting more from our relationships. We may have a relationship, for example, that is not entirely broken, but we're just tired, and we've stopped hoping it could be different. We keep showing up, and we keep putting forth a modicum of effort, but we no longer look out that window with expectancy. Oh, how many aspects of our lives have we quietly labeled as settled, as finished? "Oh well," we say, "it's just life. That's just who I am." And we don't say such things with anger; we say them with resignation. We say them with that quiet and pervasive belief that there's no need to expect things to be different.

The mistakes we've made, the weariness of the world around us — maybe without ever saying it out loud, we convince ourselves there's no need to look for fruit. Maybe in another season, and when faith is easier, and when circumstances improve, maybe at a more convenient time. I dare say that sometimes we even say it about Christ's Church. And we love the church! We're here, after all, but we also know her flaws. We've

watched the greater church drift toward ideology and away from theology, and who hasn't seen the local church spin her wheels in committees and routines? Seasons come and go, and children are baptized, we enjoy women's retreats and Oyster Roasts, we volunteer and we serve; but if we're not careful, slowly but persistently, we begin to stop expecting the unexpected. We don't announce it. We don't confess it. We simply stop looking for fruit. And that is one of the dangers that Jesus is warning us about.

Yesterday, we celebrated the life of Nancy Lilly, and one of the things that came up was the faithfulness of her husband, Ed, particularly during the more challenging times, and as Nancy's memory began to fade. Now, what the world may have seen in Nancy's outward appearance was a searching glance, and perhaps a failing mortal body, but Ed viewed her as his loving and faithful wife, a woman not burdened by limitations, but a precious child of God with immense worth. When Ed looked at her, he expected to see more — he saw the fruit.

So, what do we see in the world around us? We're pretty good at adjusting our expectations to what seems reasonable, but God's grace is anything but reasonable. God does not look at the world and say, "Well, this is as good as it gets." Nor does God look at your life or mine and see bareness or throw His hands up in resignation, because God expects more. In fact, God expects fruit in every season, and He expects us to do the same.

On a Sunday like this, when new members are uniting in the life of our church family, these lessons should resonate with us. To those who are joining today, perhaps these lessons echo with a resounding welcome and an appreciation for a mutually affirmed sense of call, but they should also echo with an expectation that God will continue to be at work in their lives. And to those who have been here at First (Scots) for forever and a day, perhaps seeing new members join reminds them again of why God called them to this sacred place. Goodness knows, God did not call us as finished products, but as people who are continually being formed and reformed, people who are expected to grow in faith and to bear fruit.

When we look out through those windows of ours, we know, deep down inside, that things can still happen; and yet, if nothing has happened for a while, we may find ourselves tempted to stop looking and to assume that what we see is all there is to see. But when Jesus looked out upon the world, and when his eyes fell upon that fig tree, he refused that temptation. He knew that God was still at work among his people. He knew, and knows, that fruit can undoubtedly appear in unexpected times and in unexpected ways.

May we, too, look with eyes of faith; may we always trust that God is still at work in our midst; and may we dare to look for fruit, not only in the seasons when it seems reasonable to expect it, but in every season, because, at the end of the day, and in God's economy of grace, all seasons are seasons of mercy, and every season holds the possibility of a generous harvest of the Spirit. Oh, if we cannot see that, then we must look again. And if we still don't see it, we look again. And why? Because God looks again and again and again — not upon our outward appearances, but upon our hearts. God sees who we can be, who we are supposed to be. He sees the fruit we can bear, and He sees the fruit that can be born in the world around us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.