

“A Big Figging Deal” (17Jan21)  
John1:43-51; Psalm139; 1Cor6:12-20

Among the least profound statements from Jesus—and, therefore, among my favorites—is the theological nugget “I saw you under the fig tree.”

It’s probably pointless, unlikely connected to other figs in the Bible, such as the prophet Micah declaring, “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; but they shall all sit under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid” (4:3-4).

Under the fig tree, Nathanael could’ve been preparing for nonviolent activism, or maybe he was there filching figs from someone else. Either way, it probably doesn’t make a fig of difference, symbolizing nothing about Nathanael, just an obscure, trivial detail.

But that would be just fine, because Jesus comes for regular life, in the silly moments and asinine details.

Similarly from our first reading, a 12-year-old boy heard God. It’s not because Eli was aging that he didn’t understand at first, nor because he was the religious leader that he should’ve gotten the visit. Samuel’s own pseudo-fig-tree came when he was mostly looking for some shut eye and not a divine vision.

That’s hammered home, into your home and your very self, with the Psalm and God’s presence wherever you are. Since nothing you do can separate you from God, no special pieties or practices or prettiness get you closer to God. Notice this is about your body, from fetus to grave: your skin, bones, lips, limbs, muscles, intestines, brain, thoughts—all known by God for God’s marvelous creation. By no stretch of the imagination (or stretch of the sore ligaments) could a blemish or infirmity make God stop loving you. The wrinkles and the aches, imperfections you stare at in the mirror, the parts that don’t quite work how you want, to perform at championship levels, the idiosyncrasies that make you you—these aren’t bad in God’s view. God made you, made your

body, your self. From before your birth until long after death, God accepts and surrounds you.

Just as you’re coming to terms with the goodness and acceptability and blessedness of your body, Paul offers you and the Corinthians the expansive reminder, “You are not your own.” Your body is a temple, the dwelling place of God’s Holy Spirit. Wow! You are not your own. You are claimed by God.

And you are claimed *for* others. Through these eight or so chapters, Paul will emphasize what it means to be the body of Christ. We are linked to each other. You are not individual, nor even one in a community. Your existence is so deeply, directly intertwined that you are not your own.

It can be apparent reality. If Roanna practices piano, it has an impact on our shared ability to worship. Lindy had hand surgery this week, in part so she’d be able to continue playing flute for us. Her health, then, is clearly tied to our mutual wellbeing. I know my sleep on Saturday night affects how I’m able to be your pastor on Sunday morning. Those are obvious connections.

Paul takes it deeper, with sexual morality. Notice this issue of sleeping around isn’t about marital ethics, but is what it means for the church. Again, how you use your body relates to who we are together.

More specific to Paul’s point: in the original Greek, this word is actually “porn,” for prostitutes, clearly related to our word pornography, and also to fornicating. We could think of an individual (mostly, we might as well say a man) seeking his own pleasure. But since we are bound together, there is no isolated way to do that. It may affect how he looks at women and how he is able to be in relationship.

Now, maybe the Corinthian church didn’t have any members who were prostitutes, and I wonder if that’s part of why Paul could write about them as so other and *not* part of shared wellbeing. Likewise, Jesus hung out with prostitutes, or sex workers to use their preferred title, and didn’t tell them they had to find another profession before he was willing to associate with them.

For us, the point isn't to feel good about ourselves with judgmentalism that makes outsiders, not for easy categorical condemnations that don't really affect us. Taking Paul's guidance is about pondering how we're doing in relationships, with our bodies for the sake of the body.

To consider that better, let's ratchet it down to be less titillating, not sucked into alluring sex talk. See, Paul even relates it to your stomach and food. So eating junk food has bigger implications than just your waistline or cholesterol.

We can discern the body of Christ, or simply see ourselves amid systems: your diet might have responsibility for the safety of immigrant workers in meat packing, or land use of clear cut monoculture poisoned with chemicals, to name just a couple possibilities.

Here's another approach from Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached:

Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means...no individual can live alone; no nation can live alone...We must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools...

It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

*(Dr. King continued with examples that may be outdated or even racist, but let's take his point.)*  
...You get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for the sponge, and that's handed to you by a Pacific islander. You reach for a bar of soap, and that's given to you at the hands of a Frenchman. And then you go into the kitchen to drink your coffee, and that's poured into your cup by a South American. And maybe you want tea: that's from China. Or maybe you're having cocoa for breakfast, and that's poured by a West African. And then you reach over for your toast, and that's given to you at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And before you finish eating breakfast in the

morning, you've depended on more than half of the world.

This is the way our universe is structured, this is its interrelated quality. We aren't going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.\*

Paul saw how we share and depend on each other as the body of Christ. We expand and see this "inescapable network of mutuality" and "single garment of destiny" in relationship with all humanity, all creation. So what are we supposed to do in that?

On the one hand, your location, your age, your body type, your choices neither determine or prevent God's blessing for you. Is it alright, then, to hang out under fig trees? Could Samuel just as well have gone back to sleep, preferring that over waking to the word of the Lord? Could you pleasure your body as much as you prefer and abuse it as much as you want?

Well, technically, yes.

Even if it's not helpful, you have the freedom to do anything (1Cor6:12). Your identity is held in Christ. You are claimed as a beloved child of God. That will be true no matter how you look or how you act. You can't flee from God's goodness, can't stop your body from being a temple of the Holy Spirit.

But maybe you also yearn not to litter the temple with junk, instead for that goodness to radiate, to be of further benefit, to live well and fully in this body of Christ, with those who depend on you, in this inescapable network of creation.

With that, I suspect in this inauguration week you may be trying to reflect on what current events mean, of our government and fellow citizens and glaring ostensible divisions, with violence and those you'd prefer not to be connected to. You may be trying to figure out how to be in the midst of that in these times, pondering complex relationships. There's no simple answer.

Maybe not based on our abilities or inabilities, not from fears or past failures, nor overwhelmed by the frayed fabric and stained spots in the single garment of destiny, maybe you yet look with hope.

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\* abridged from "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," *A Testament of Hope*, p253-54

Dr. King ended the sermon we were hearing before by saying,

I still have a dream that one day [people] will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as [siblings]. I still have a dream that one day...brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but rather the first order of business on every legislative agenda...I still have a dream that one day [we] will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that nations will no longer rise up against nations, [that all] will sit under their own fig trees and none shall be afraid.\*\*

Whether you've got those big dreams or are just wanting God to find you in the sleepless nights or pointless moments of life, your big worries or miniscule personal discontents, whether you're considering yourself on the right side of history or preferring to escape the network of mutuality, remember you are not your own. You belong to Christ, claimed for each other.

Hymn: "We Shall Overcome"