



Learning from fig trees

Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit. Proverbs 27:18a

By Bishop Kathy

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Did you know that fig trees were one of the first fruit trees cultivated in ancient times and that they remain popular because they will thrive even if slightly neglected? Fig trees don't mind poor soil conditions and take up little space in your yard. Amazingly, they can produce two crops of fruit every year!

One expert says that there are two things fig trees need to grow --sunshine and elbow room. Now that might be so if you live in India or the Mediterranean but for us in this widely diverse Canadian climate there are some other things to consider. I know because my previous home had two fig trees, one on either side of the house. The one on the southeast corner had more sunlight, it bloomed and produced with great regularity. The other, errantly planted in the shady northwest, did not do so well. It often got waterlogged with the runoff from the roof and struggled to survive.

There are other things to consider. The right variety for our climate zone is important. Deciding where to plant it is next. Should it go into a large pot that can be moved into the house when winter comes, or in a garden bed that is easily mulched. The fig tree's roots grow close to the surface, so they need to be amply protected. And where exactly in the garden, with other plants and trees already in place, would it thrive well? How will it interact with what is already there?

That's why good gardeners don't simply take that first little bit of advice about sun and elbow room and blithely move forward. Instead with enough information and careful planning a fig tree is purchased, then planted, fertilized, and watered. Companion plants for the fig tree are put in place. A friend tells me the best ones are comfrey, wildflowers, strawberries, and lavender for they will attract pollinators, build healthy soil, and repel pests. You can imagine how delicious the strawberries will be as you wait for the fig tree to first blossom, then bear fruit, then ripen. Picture the wonderful fig jam in your future or a roasted fig tart with honey and goat cheese. Then there is the sweet smell of the lavender on a warm summer evening, baked into goodies or tucked away in a drawer.

There are other places in our world where the fig tree plays a different role in the ecosystem. Small populations of fig trees offer a supportive food source as well as conservation benefits for the declining population of insect-eating birds. They also provide high quality fruit for many animals, who attracted by the delicious figs often carry other plants' seeds in their digestive tracks. These seeds are subsequently deposited below the fruiting fig tree. This can lead to patches of forest with especially high plant diversity. Many scientists believe fig trees have not only shaped our species and the world about us, but they are also the most ecologically and culturally important group of plants on the planet. That means they could help address some of the biggest

ecological challenges we face — from conserving rare wildlife to restoring ravaged rainforests, a tiny step toward limiting climate change.

A few months ago, our synod's Climate Justice Action Group partnered with ELCIC Assistant to the Bishop for Youth and Leadership, Deacon Gretchen Peterson to listen to the young adults who have attended the UN Conference on Climate Change Conference. The panel, Jeff Buhse, Katarina Kuhnert, and Erika Rodning, were incredible. It was both fascinating and terrifying to listen to what they had to say about the web of connection between our actions/inaction and the world's climate crisis.

The biblical fig tree thrived and bore good fruit because someone was paying attention, someone was ensuring it had what it needed to thrive. Those gardeners understood there was a symbiotic relationship between all that God created, including each one of us. They knew that when we live with an awareness of our interdependence and interconnectedness, everything is more likely to thrive. They also understood that when we harm even one little part of it, then begins the potential to harm it all. That is the story of the climate crisis.

Of course, there is a story that moves in the opposite direction too. A story that offers us hope that if we join together and do the hard work of moving toward healing in even one part, then begins the potential to move toward the healing of it all. May it be so.