

Paying Attention 101: The Learning Tree

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

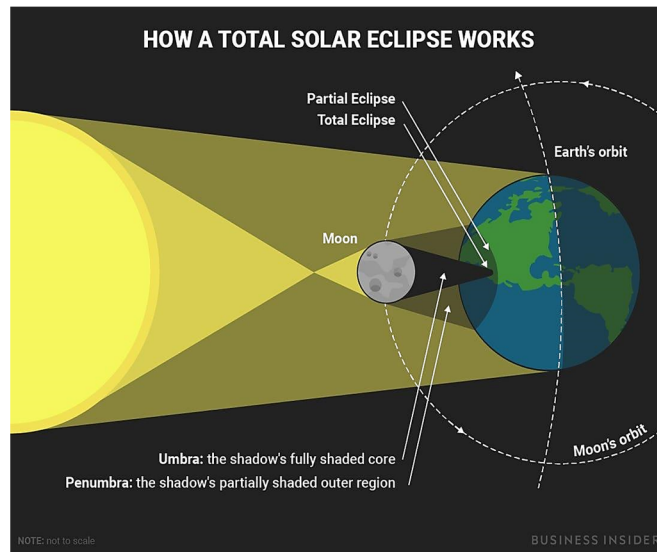


"Fig Tree" by Paul Klee

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds
By the power of your Holy Spirit,
That as the Scriptures are read
And your Word is proclaimed,
We may hear with joy
What you say to us today.
Amen

Background



Alan Hirsch and Mark Nelson in their excellent book on mission entitled "*Reframation*" talk about what happens during a solar eclipse. The sun stays the same—it doesn't move or change. But from the vantage point of earth, the moon gets in between the earth and the sun.



The moon blocks all or a portion of our view of the sun. Darkness ensues—a bad moon risin'. It seems like the sun has moved or changed, but it hasn't. Just the moon got in our way.

Similarly, the culture today appears to be experiencing an *eclipse of God*.

God is still here and hasn't changed—but it feels like he's gone or been replaced. God is there. Just an object or objects have inserted themselves between us and God. Our view of God has become blocked.

The existence or fullness of God appears to be eclipsed today in the West as we hear about the shrinking of the church and fewer people identifying themselves as Christian.

Hirsch and Nelson then make the case that objects, ideas, ideologies, and idols have obscured or entirely blocked our view of God. It feels like the *eclipse of God*.

But Jesus in our passage shows us how we can “shoot the moon” so to speak and douse the darkness with the Son of God. We can relocate our spiritual horizons and rediscover our faith bearings. Our view of God and the world can be reconfigured and re-enchanted. We can cultivate an awareness of God’s presence, even in a time of uncertainty and uproar. With Christ’s help, we connect the dots and reframe the picture. We can move from fear to hope.

In our gospel reading, Jesus uses another illustration from nature to help us do that.

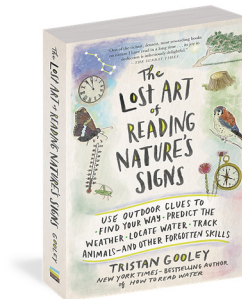
So let’s hear now from Mark 13:28-31...

Scripture: Mark 13:28-31 (NRSV)

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Paying Attention 101: The Learning Tree



One of my favorite books I’ve read this year is Tristan “Gooley’s *The Lost Art of Reading Nature’s Signs*.” This is a book to read and re-read throughout your life. When Tristan goes outside, he sees creation’s clues all around him:

- the Big Dipper is a star dial that tells time;
- a passing butterfly gives a weather forecast;
- a sand dune reveals the direction of wind;
- the whiff of cinnamon indicates altitude;
- and a budding flower points south.

In his chapter on trees, we learn more fascinating creation clues:

- The higher in altitude you climb, the shorter the trees grow.
- The bark of the tree is usually darker on the north side of the tree.
- The more a tree is exposed to wind, the shorter and the thicker the tree trunk will be.
- If you're hiking and suddenly stumble upon many sycamore and ash trees, you're likely in a flood plain.
- If you come across a willow tree out in nature, you're likely near a stream, river, or along a spring line.
- Trees aren't symmetrical—they usually grow bigger on their southern side because of more sun exposure.
- Trees use their roots as anchors, so on the windward side of the tree the roots are thicker and longer.
- Trees often have two different kinds of leaves on them: sun leaves and shade leaves. Shade leaves are larger, thinner, and darker than sun leaves.
- Finally, you can figure out how old a tree is by counting its rings—and each year the tree ring grows slightly more narrow.

Just as we can read nature's signs with training and extra attention, so we can read the signs of the times and the spirit of the age. You just have to take the time to notice. You can miss it if you're not careful. You also can read too much into signs as well. Prayer and reflection are necessary.

Jesus gives us several admonitions in this passage and throughout the gospels to be more discerning in our lives:

Stay awake! — Be alert! — Let those who have ears, hear. — Be ready. — Be on your guard. — Take care that no one leads you astray.

In other words, Jesus and the fig tree are teaching a parable. The name of their class is "Paying Attention 101." This spiritual practice and art involves multi-tasking, walking and chewing gum at the same time. Discernment entails using both your HS Detector (Holy Spirit Detector) and your BS Detector. Beholding the world with both love and a filter, simultaneously.

So Jesus and the fig tree are teaching us about the "*Lost Art of Reading*," the "*Signs of the Times*," and the "*Spirit of the Age*." Jesus tells us we can do this because of two reasons: one, God is near, and two, Jesus' promises hold steady and hold us steady. Therefore we can keep calm and carry on, even when things are changing fast or falling apart. When Jesus talks about "*these things taking place*" and "*this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place*," he's talking about the national crisis that was about to take place in their lifetime. In other words, Jesus is not talking about the end of the world here, but the destruction of the temple. He's preparing the disciples for the end of the Jewish people's way of life as they've known it.

In the late 60s AD, Israel successfully revolted against Rome. However, Rome recaptured Israel in 70 AD, and then they brutally punished Israel for their rebellion by destroying their pride and joy: *the glorious temple*. There will eventually be an end of days, but this passage is not speaking about that. Jesus is equipping us to survive and thrive when major disruption happens, whether it be collective or individual. Jesus is counseling us on how to manage change and loss.

You will make it through. — Trust. — Take heart. — I'm here with you.

God is guiding you. God is guiding history. You have a destiny and a destination. It may be delayed or detoured, but we will get there. Just don't forget to enjoy the journey and take in the sights along the way.

I don't know about you, but when things seem to be going haywire in my life, I feel closest to God. I have to rely upon God more deeply and desperately than ever before. Sure, I like it when things are going well. I want that. Pray for it. Much prefer it. But it's also much easier to coast on cruise control when everything's hunky-dory or copacetic. Learn the lesson, or literally in the Greek, "*Learn the parable*" of the fig tree.

Fig trees are EVERYWHERE in the Holy Land. The signs are all around.



Fig trees usually bud in March or April. Most other trees in the Holy Land are evergreen so they don't lose their leaves, but fig trees do. So when the fig trees are budding, know that summer is right around the corner, a new season is coming—a time of good changes, and a time of tough changes.

Fig trees were also symbolic in Judaism representing the joy of the coming messianic age. Jesus was letting the disciples know he was fulfilling that. The fig tree proclaimed the good news: the Messiah has arrived! Jesus wants us to pay attention, to recognize the emerging changes before they've fully happened, so we aren't caught unawares or flat footed.

Signs are all around us today too. Signs of historical changes, personal changes, societal changes, and institutional changes. Not about the end of the world, but the end of the world as we've known it. God wants us to be aware of what's going on now, not some vague time in the future. Day by day we trust. Sometimes that's too long. Then we live day by night. We pray for our daily bread, not our yearly or decade-ly bread. Jesus says in our passage, "truly, verily, or AMEN" I say to you:

Open up your eyes! — Be prepared! — Don't focus so much on the destination, that you miss the journey. — Connect the dots one at a time.— Don't get ahead of yourself.

And Jesus assures us:

My words are more enduring than creation. — My promises shall not pass away. — Everything will be okay.

It's important to note here that Jesus isn't giving us a "Fortune Telling 101" lesson. There are no "Christian" horoscopes to follow. Jesus doesn't do this. Beware of anyone who does, even in Christ's name. Jesus doesn't want us reading tea leaves. But he does want us reading fig tree leaves which is very different. Reading tea leaves and reading tree leaves is kind of like comparing apples to oranges. In fact, a verse later (Mark 13:32) Jesus says,

"No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows."

Jesus does tell us about this: how to be aware of what's unfolding all around you.

How to have:

- *eyes that see,*
- *ears that hear*
- *noses that smell,*
- *tongues that taste,*
- *and a heart that feels.*

In other words, Jesus wants us to be ready in and out of season, to discern the time and how not to be deceived. Accurately reading tree leaves involves tapping into our inner and spiritual Sherlock Holmes:

- thoughtfully studying Scriptures,
- learning the lay of the land,
- prayerfully discerning the sign of the times, and
- understanding the zeitgeist—the spirit of the age.

It's sorting out the meat, from the bones.

Karl Barth reminds us to beware of idolatry of our news sources—

"Take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both."

—says the greatest theologian of the 20th century. But his next words have been forgotten:

"But interpret newspapers from your Bible."

Don't reverse the order. Don't ever, ever let your favorite cable news station or newspaper or your favorite radio personality interpret the Bible for you. Pundits aren't prophets.

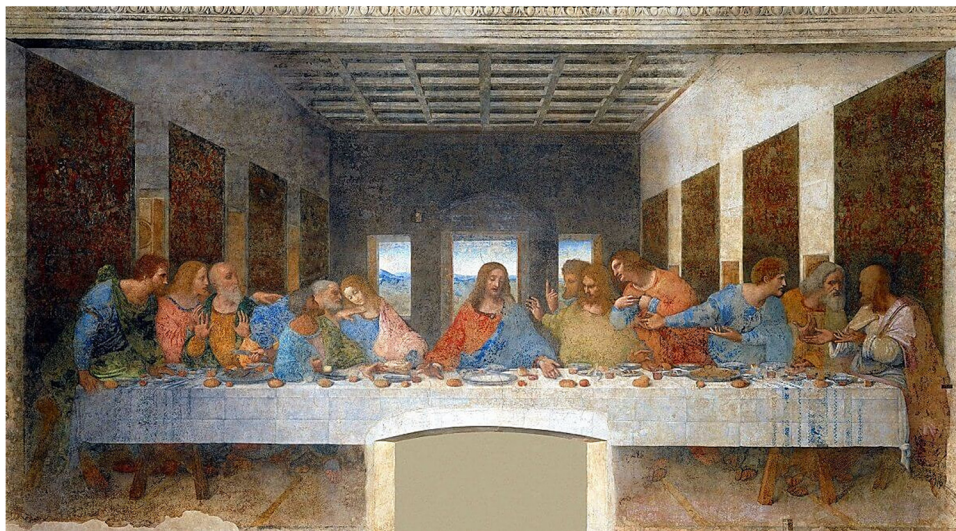
We also listen to what the community is saying—taking the pulse of the relational and environmental clues people and circumstances give us. Jesus is challenging us to keep our eyes wide open for the signs everywhere that point our way to God, the signs that help us find our bearings and regain our sense of spiritual direction. This doesn't happen by osmosis or by accident. Rather it becomes second nature by reflective action and active reflection:

Slowing down and observing. — Noticing and considering. — Beholding and reflecting. — Praying and asking. — Reconsidering, improvising, and adapting. — Perpetual learning, unlearning, and relearning.

Aristotle said that knowledge has three components braided together: theoretical, practical, and productive. The desire to discern and obey God's will involves investing in other kinds of knowledge too:

- God knowledge
- Book knowledge
- Relational knowledge
- Self-knowledge and
- Experiential knowledge—where notes are taken and lessons are learned from the school of hard knocks.

Another way to describe it is that we need contextual intelligence. Contextual intelligence is the ability to read between the lines and accurately diagnose the situation you find yourself in, or the situation your family, church, nation, or world is in, and then make right and thoughtful decisions on what to do. It's learning from history rather than repeating it. A little self-doubt thrown in the mix keeps us honest, too. So we're open to feedback—learning by trial and error and course correcting. We're fellow learners on a learning curve in a learning community.



"The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci

Take for example, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. We all know this painting, but have you really looked at it? Have you ever noticed that there is a door in front of the table? The *Last Supper* is a wall fresco, and at some point in the monastery, someone decided to put a door in the wall, and to cut through Leonardo de Vinci's masterpiece!

Part of the table and Jesus' feet—GONE. The architect literally cut Jesus' feet out from under him!

Also, isn't it interesting that Jesus and the disciples are all on one side of the table? It's like one long kitchen island. They're getting a group selfie together.

The *Last Supper* painting is what's called a "cenacolo."

Da Vinci was called upon to create a food scene fresco that the Dominican monks would silently study while they ate in the refectory. Da Vinci's *Last Supper* was the head table in a banquet hall of tables. Sometime, try eating some spaghetti or pizza when you enjoy the *Last Supper*! You'll be joining in a long history of Dominican Monks doing the same.

Christ also doesn't want us to be clueless about ourselves. It's crucial to pay attention to what's going on inside of us—self-care and paying attention to your health. Also growing in emotional intelligence, relational intelligence, social intelligence, and situational awareness. All of this is to know ourselves and others better. Knowledge of God, ourselves, and community are all interrelated.

The fig tree teaches us about 3D perception—incorporating hindsight, insight, and foresight to better perceive our environment. This enables us to draw from all the tenses of our lives—past, present, and future. Another way to think about paying attention is to have the mind of Christ, the mindset of Christ, the attitude of Christ, as Paul says, where Christ in us shapes our outlook, fashions our filter, and framework, recalculates our orientation, and forms our assumptions of and attitudes toward others.

Reading fig tree leaves involves not just what we think, but how we think. It is to have the disposition of Christ. Not just his mentality, but his humility.



I like the image Leonard Sweet and Michael Beck give in their book *Contextual Intelligence*. They say we can learn from our fellow mammal, the whale, on this one. Whales live in one world, but they breathe in the air from another world. Like the whale, we're in the world, but not of the world. We breathe in the kingdom of God. Then we go down and live on earth in the "here below." We go back up for fresh air, then go back down to sink or swim. Without the oxygen of the kingdom of God, we will spiritually drown in our earthly lives. Prayer, corporate worship, and Scripture spiritually oxygenate our lungs.

Philosopher Heidegger wrote about a term he called "thrownness," meaning every one of us are thrown into or thrust into a world and culture we did not choose. We didn't choose when or where we'd be born. We didn't choose a pandemic. We didn't choose social media, or 9-11, or the turn away from organized religion, but it is our reality and our world. So we seek to understand our new world rather than ignore it or retreat from it into a mythical golden age that never really existed. Instead, we engage our time, we seek to understand what's going on now. We celebrate the good and prophetically challenge what is wrong, to accept it and to give some pushback.

We Christians have a calling to **sniff out** and **snuff out** cults and idols that eclipse and obscure our view of God.

Allow me to step out on the fig tree limb here. One of the big idols in America today is the culture cult. Notice the word “**cult**” is in the word “**culture**.” It’s no accident. We learn the culture and we also call out the culture when it becomes a cult:

- **Consumer Culture**—the worship of money and stuff and mammon
- **Celebrity Culture**—hero worship
- **Ego Culture**—self worship
- **Safety Culture**—the worship of safety
- **Politics Culture**—the worship of politics—believing that politics, not Jesus, saves, baptizes, and defines us. Politics Culture is idolatry and it takes many forms. It’s an unhealthy relationship and undue devotion to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party or really any party or ideology. Patriotism or any “ISM” becomes your church, your dogma.

This is totally different from being engaged in politics. We all are called to be aware and engaged. What I’m talking about is different—when politics becomes your religion, your final say in life.

Jesus tells us: “*No one can serve two masters.*”

- We can worship the cult of **US Culture**—where we have a superiority complex towards everything that is not American.
- There is **Conspiracy Culture**—the idol of the imagined enemy.
- **Resentment Culture**—where the other side is vilified and viewed with scorn, hatred, revenge, and envy. Your group has a deep sense of being wronged and is entitled to something and will get it at any cost. Politics is war—a life or death matter. I worry someday that Resentment Culture will lead to America’s second Civil War.

To read tree leaves is to resist reductionism. We’ve got to be careful of reducing the worship of the living God into a particular worship style. We’ve got to refuse reducing mission to merely evangelism or just social justice. We need both. We can’t reduce spirituality to escapism from the world.

Disciples of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras were called “*acousmatists*” meaning “listeners who stay tuned.” Immanuel, let’s stay tuned in, attuned, plugged in, and connected to Christ.

Let’s be the Christ’s acousmatists.

Amen.

Sermon Art:

“*Fig Tree*” by Paul Klee, 1929 (*fair use*)

“*The Last Supper*” by Leonardo da Vinci, 1498

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