

In Between Rest & Growth

The Parable of the Fig Tree

Luke 13:6-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to start by again mentioning that during the season of Lent this year, we're looking at what might seem like opposites or extremes, and discover that there is an in between. It's about approaching certain issues in life as a both/and instead of just an either/or. We looked at the familiar **Parable of the Good Samaritan** which showed us there is an in between **stranger and neighbor**. Then, the story of **Martha and Mary** revealed there is an in between **faith and works**. And today, through the **Parable of the Fig Tree**, we will be looking for an in between **rest and growth**. Our resource material for Lent, A Sanctified Art, connects the theme this way.

The gardener in the vineyard knows the fig tree needs rest, nutrients, and time—and it also needs to produce fruit. Both things are true, which is also true for us. If we are always striving for more growth without taking time to rest, we will burn out. But if we are only ever resting, we won't bear fruit or grow. The fig tree also teaches us that the in between time—of nurture before fruit—can be where transformation begins.

Another way to approach the issue of rest and growth is by looking at the seasons of the year. We are just coming out of the **season of winter**, the dark part of the year. In the Celtic tradition, this is known as the season of Samhain (pronounced sow-en). During this time, the harvest is over and the plants and land use this opportunity to recover. This is a time of promise of new birth, a time of waiting and reflection, of letting go of the old and looking ahead to the new.

Winter, then, is a time of rest. Yet, it's an active rest. Trees and seeds are preparing for the season of spring by gathering nutrients before they bloom again. And as gardeners know, faithful waiting doesn't mean doing nothing: The gardener waters, weeds, and fertilizes. In the parable, the gardener basically asks for mercy, to give the fig tree a second chance. And during this time of being granted another year to produce fruit, the gardener will tend and nurture the fig tree. Perhaps it has been neglected and just needs some tender loving care. Our resource material comments:

As modern readers, one thing is true: **we may easily identify and sympathize with the fig tree.** We ourselves may often feel as if our worth is defined and measured by what we produce. We know how difficult it can be to rest in a world that never stops sprinting. We may feel the pressure to produce outcomes without the support and resources to feasibly do so. And like the fig tree, many of us journey through in-between seasons: undefined and uncertain chapters when we don't quite know if any change is—or can—take place.

When facing uncertainty, perhaps we can put the gardener's skills into practice. We might imagine that the gardener practices patience, hope, trust, discernment, resilience, and openness as the gardener tends to the roots and soil. Can we embody these traits as well?

What would a little nurture do for your soul and spirit right now? What are the restful, nurturing practices that you need in order to grow and thrive and bear fruit?

Let's dig a little deeper. The resource material asks, "**What is your relationship with rest? Do you prioritize it, or neglect it?** Do you struggle with hyperproductivity? Have you internalized harmful messages about rest? What parts of your story (and what habits) could be transformed?" Those are good questions to ponder, both individually, and for us together as a community of faith. And if you put yourself into the role of the gardener instead of the fig tree, what might you do to nurture another person who is in need at this time? What might we do as a community of faith to nurture not only one another but also a hurting world? Biblical commentator Abigail W. Kocher writes, "We are all the fig tree. There is some hopelessness, some barrenness, some deadness that we cannot seem to overcome on our own. The good news is that God in Christ is fully devoted to us and our salvation."

Now, if we continue to follow the example of seasonal change, the earth turns on its axis and it becomes **springtime. The earth moves from a time of rest to a time of growth.** It's no accident that we call this liturgical church season Lent. Lent comes from the word that means lengthen, as in the lengthening of sunlight hours. Lent, then, has the built-in connotation of springtime. After a season of being nurtured, like the fig tree, it's now time for growth. We're seeing evidence of that right now as spring has already brought forth many flowers and leaves on a variety of trees. **It's also a time for our spiritual growth as we seek to connect with God and follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. After a nurturing season of rest, we are entering a season of new beginnings, a chance to begin again – as individuals and as a community of faith.**

The landowner in this parable, which many biblical commentators warn against taking too literally as God, nevertheless shows mercy and gives the fig tree a second chance. **Everyone likes a good second chance story!** Wherever we find ourselves in life, whatever predicaments we are in, it's good to know that our God is a God of mercy, patience, and second, third, fourth, etc. chances. Our resource material asks, "**What is your posture toward growth? In seasons of personal growth, do you embrace the opportunity to learn and change?** When facing your growing edges, do you lean in? Or do you tend to avoid growth and change? If so, why?" What are the growing edges in your life at this moment in time? How is God's grace part of that growth?

Poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes, in a poem he entitles "**Merciful Manure**", writes:

Holy One,
 how are you digging around
 in the soil of my soul?
 What are you disturbing?
 Loosening? Unearthing?
 Give me patience to abide,
 and wisdom to attend.
 Show me how I might be nurtured
 by the crap I endure.
 Your will is not to punish or to test,
 but to enrich the soil of my heart
 so I may grow in trust and generosity,
 and bear the fruit of your love.
 In all things, God, feed my soul.

Yes, there is a time to rest and there is a time to grow. Where are you in your life right now? Perhaps, it's both at the same time. There may be areas in your life taking a rest, while other areas are growing. So yet again, you may find this to be a both/and time in your life rather than a simple either/or. It's kind of like the past few weeks of weather, a mix of winter and spring, back and forth.

Whatever time you find yourself, know that God is working in and through your life, and the life of others, to provide nurturing care. **If you need rest, then rest. If this is a time of growth, then grow fully. And remember, the seasons of the earth have a lot to teach us about rest and growth.**

Amen.

Resources:

Everything In Between, A Sanctified Art, 2025.
Abigail W. Kocher, *Feasting on the Gospels*.