

March 23, 2025

We're now at the Third Sunday of Lent, continuing to follow Jesus' journey down the road to Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week. And, we also continue to explore the seeming opposites contained in Luke's stories of Jesus' teaching on this journey. We've talked about intention vs. action; melding being a stranger and being a neighbor; and navigating the spiritual tension between our faith and the works that faith must produce. Today, we're exploring another polarity: rest and growth. Listen now ask God speaks to us through our second reading, from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13, verses 6-9:

6 Then (Jesus) told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. **7** So he said to the man working the vineyard, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' **8** (The gardener) replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. **9** If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.' "

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Thanks be to God!**

Sermon Title: everything [in] between: rest & growth

I have lived in six different states in my lifetime. Wherever I've lived, regardless of the geographical location – Midwest, Southwest, South, and that foreign land called Florida – I've heard this statement: "Well, here in (fill-in-the-blank), if you don't like the weather, stick around and it'll change." Wherever I've lived, they've claimed that little statement as created by, and applying only, them. So after those many years of career relocations, I am now claiming with confidence, having carefully researched the variety of geographical climates and weather patterns by residing in them – it definitely was written about the state of Michigan and life by the Great Lakes. For the change from Wednesday's incredible, 70 degree sunny taste of spring, to Thursday's drop to the 30's with rain/sleet/snow, is the most whiplash-inducing weather shift I've had the pleasure of experiencing since my childhood and young adult life. This week's experience helps me join with all Michiganders in claiming: if you don't like the weather in Michigan, just wait a day! It'll change.

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron No reuse or duplication without written permission.

So I went from no coat, taking a walk in the sunshine, cleaning out my refrigerator and feeling my blood flow quicker through my veins, to: weighted down again with a winter coat, my outdoor time the car-to-door shuffles. That external shift of weather changed what I could do, what I had the physical/emotional/spiritual energy to do. It wasn't just a seasonal shift – it shifted me internally. And so, I had an opportunity to just sit and “be”, a little. I had an opportunity to prepare ahead for some of our future worship services. I took some quiet time to dig deeply into my own personal devotions. I prepared for a future time of intense activity!

Let's look at a shift expressed in Jesus' teaching, recorded in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Luke. Jesus was approached by some people relaying horrific events going on in Jerusalem. First, Jewish worshipers murdered in the Temple courtyard by Pontius Pilate's thugs, their blood flowing into the sacrificial altar area, desecrating that holy place. The second was a disaster we have also experienced in our own lifetime: the collapse of a building, taking the lives of those in it or near it. The close proximity of these two disturbing events had the people in Galilee coming to Jesus for a word of explanation – what can these events mean? And he answers with a question: do you really think these people were more sinful than those who were not murdered, than those that narrowly escaped being crushed? Is sinfulness really the cause of these bad things happening? In each instance, Jesus says absolutely not, but – he states there is another way we die that we are more at risk for – a death of the soul, a death in our relationship with God. And so in this urgent journey to Jerusalem, Jesus says two times, “unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

To further teach them the urgency of this form of repentance, he immediately shares a story with them, one of his parables, to get a sense of what he is offering in his ministry to these people. Many of these people were sustained by agriculture: they worked on the land, producing food and luxury goods for the Roman Empire. So Jesus is again using something they are intimately knowledgeable about – growing things. In his Parable of the Fig Tree, he tells of a vineyard owner that has planted a fig tree in the middle of his acres of grapevines. The people's ears would have perked up – that's not a typical place to plant a fig tree! The vineyard owner in the story is frustrated – this tree hasn't produced fruit in three years. So, he tells the gardener, “it's taking up precious ground, wasting the space” more grape vines could be planted in that area being taken up by this tree. So, he tells him to cut it down, dig up its roots, and let that land be

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron No reuse or duplication without written permission.

redirected to something that is going to produce something for the landowner. Something that will make him some money!

But the gardener asks for a little leeway – this tree, because it isn't part of the main purpose of the vineyard, has been neglected. Past gardeners, hired to take care of the grape vines, probably had ignored it. Maybe they didn't have the knowledge on how to care for this particular type of tree. So he asks for a year to really give it the attention and care it needs. But with the caveat – not every intervention always works. If it doesn't start showing growth at that point – well, then it's time to cut it down and find a better use for the space it's taking up.

Following the natural growing seasons, knowing the needs of plants and vegetables and flowers, makes understanding Jesus' teaching with this parable that much easier. I never thought I had a green thumb, until a coworker explained that pruning is an essential way to nurture growing things. And so my potted plants thrive now, since I learned of the need to prune, to repot, to give space, and how and when to fertilize a little. God's created world was gifted to us to tend to, right in the early words of God's instructions to us in Genesis 2:15, "The Lord God took the grounding, the human made of the soil of the ground, and put this human in the garden of Eden to till and keep it." We are created to be in relationship with God, and part of how we do this is taking care of God's natural world, nurturing it, taking care of it, so that it can continue to feed us and nurture us in a symbiotic relationship. Jeff Chu in our devotional guide for this third week of Lent, shares how hidden away from our eyes beneath the soil under a fig tree is another God-designed symbiotic relationship. If you've read it, you learned that the roots of a fig tree, when healthy, are host to a particular fungi, a type of mold, and it feeds off of the roots without harming the life of the tree. In turn, this fungi emits nutrients that are essential to the growth and health of the tree. The fig tree and the fungi have a symbiotic relationship, each needing the other to live, to thrive. God did not create us to be alone – and God's master design created symbiotic relationships all the way through God's creation, in and between his created. We were made to live in relationship with each other.

And, God's creation – the natural world, and individually each of us – were designed to live within seasons. Like the trees and plants and the animal life around us, there are seasons and phases we go through. Just like the four seasons of the year, the Church also has its seasons: Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter. And in between, we have the season of Common or Ordinary, which lets us rest after the intense periods of reflection and growth that come from our

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron No reuse or duplication without written permission.

celebration of the high holidays. Some seasons are short; some are longer. Some involve taking something out of our lives during that time period, giving something up, like chocolate! Some seasons involve adding something to our lives that feeds us, body, soul and spirit, like twinkling lights and gift giving. So, some seasons involve pruning something off of our life; some seasons involve planting something in our life. But all should lead to growth, and fruit – new foliage, a short season of blossoms, and the seed or fruit that comes out of the blossom. Fruit is always the goal.

In the season of Advent this past year, our Advent sermon series juxtaposed the four Advent candles with four of the fruits of the Spirit outlined in the Letter to the Galatians. Galatians 5: 22-23 tells us, “... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...” This is evidence that our life in Jesus Christ, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit he sent to us, is resulting in spiritual growth. We are only growing and thriving when we produce fruit in our lives. And the fruits of the Spirit are the evidence of our healthy and thriving relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

The explanation of Jesus’ parable of the fig tree often stops there. We need to produce the fruit of the Spirit, or we also could be chopped down and thrown into the fire. The fire and brimstone conclusion to the lesson. But does a plant produce fruit in every season? Does it produce it “on demand?” Can we use will power to grow fruit? And so do we, can we, as God’s created, produce spiritual fruit in every season of our life? We know from our lived experience the answer to that is “no” – as humans that’s not sustainable. Like the natural world, we have times where we don’t exhibit much self control, we don’t act very generous, we lose our patience. When we don’t exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, we also need times of rest, where we are tended to or tend to ourself, where we settle in with the spiritual foods given us, and take time to let them do their work in us, feed us, germinate deep within us to contribute to the next phase of growth and blooming and production of fruit.

We can see what growth should look like in our Christian life: it produces the fruits of the Spirit the writer of Galatians outlines, like love, joy, peace, patience, self-control. But what does rest look like in our Christian life? Anymore, its not our Sunday Sabbath day – some weeks, that is just as activity filled as the rest of the week. Well then: is it taking a break from committee work, being a Deacon, being an elder for a year or two? Does it mean we should take a break

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron No reuse or duplication without written permission.

from Bible studies, teaching Sunday School, hosting Coffee Hour after the church service, participating in a local mission activity? Is it just a cessation of activity?

Now that we understand some of the specifics of the choice of a fig tree for Jesus' parable, we can see a richer, deeper meaning to what should have happened, but didn't, in the life of this tree. The gardener is the one that recognized it – its care had been neglected; it wasn't being fed; the symbiotic relationship deep in the ground as a result had probably been disrupted. It hadn't produced fruit because what it needed for growth wasn't happening. It wasn't a lack of activity it needed – the cessation of activity was actually hindering its ability to produce fruit. It just needed activity that would feed it going forward, activity that nourished the roots hidden away in the dark soil, hidden to the human eye.

And so this parable should be looked at through a different lens than just "repent or go to the fires of hell" The seasons of rest and growth are symbiotic, and blend into one flowing dance. What is happening on the surface is part of our Christian walk – the thoughts, words and deeds we display out of our growing faith in God through his Son, Jesus Christ. But what is happening deep within us, the part that isn't seen, that we may assume to be inactive, must be fed and nurtured in order for those fruits to display themselves. Quiet time with God, in silence or in prayers of thanksgiving and supplication. Meditating on God's word, slowly and deeply reading and re-reading parts of Scripture to experience how God speaks to us through it. Practicing looking for the presence of God in our life, in our daily tasks going through life, in our reflection on why and how we do things and seeing God's hand in our life. All of these feed the soul. All of these are the tending and the feeding of our souls so that the fruit of the Spirit shows beyond the surface, in our outward life. Rest isn't inactivity; it's activity that feeds us emotionally, spiritually.

As I was starting to write this sermon, pondering the lessons of rest and growth, I received an email that spoke to this topic. The Presbytery of Detroit's Interim Executive Presbyter, the Rev. Leslie Mott, sent out a short letter to the Presbytery that included these observations about the Lenten season: "Our perspective is limited and incomplete. The spiritual practices of Lent call us into the liminal space between what is seen and unseen. Prayer and silence, fasting and meditation, the giving of time and treasure, and the taking of time in retreat and solitude; all invite us to remain in the uncertain, perhaps uncomfortable spaces where God can have God's way with us.... In centering prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within us. Perhaps Lent is that time for us to consent

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron No reuse or duplication without written permission.

to what is happening, whether we understand it or not. It is important to note that acceptance and approval are two different things.... (but) for this time, may we dwell .. in the liminal space of early Spring, where roots spread and grow, where seeds crack and open, where the unseen is moving.”

And then she shared a poem by Wendell Berry, an essayist and poet I deeply appreciate, who writes about dwelling in the in-between, and how to rest in the growing natural world created for us to live in, in his poem, *The Peace of Wild Things*:

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light.
For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

What are we called to do in an in-between time? It certainly feels like it physically in Port Huron: Spring weather on Wednesday; winter returns on Thursday. Friday, brilliant sun. Saturday? Back to winter and snow again. This in-between of seasons, the liminal space of early Spring, is disorienting. The external circumstances around us change, but deep within us – unseen by others – we have to live out within ourselves our purpose under God’s sovereign plan. What helps us do this? “*by rest(ing) in the grace of the world.*” By experiencing God’s grace through feeding our souls. Being intentional about caring for our spiritual life. Asking ourselves, in any time where we slow down the external activity: is this time of rest now being filled by those things that produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit? There should be an urgency to this: Jesus warns we may not get another fallow time, we may not have much extra time to produce that fruit. Lent is a time to reflect. We don’t know how much time we have. Our rest must lead to fruit. What are we doing with it? As you rest – also, you must grow. Amen.

Property of Rev. Kathy A. Tessin and First Presbyterian Church, Port Huron No reuse or duplication without written permission.