

“Between Rest & Growth”

Luke 13:6-9

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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So who are the gardeners here this morning? Are you feeling antsy as you wait for spring to arrive so you can get outside and plant those little seedlings that you started weeks ago? You don't want to plant too early, but you don't want to wait until it's too late, either. Waiting is a huge part of gardening. You put tomato plants in the ground in May and don't see fruit until August. But those luscious tomatoes are worth the wait!

Jesus' parable in today's Gospel lesson is all about waiting. In this story, a landowner had a fig tree planted on his property and now he wanted some figs! For three years he had been waiting for the tree to produce fruit, but it had not. So he had had enough. *This tree is worthless – it's wasting soil that could be used for something else*, he thought. *So cut it down*, he directed his gardener. But the gardener wasn't ready to do that. *Let's give it one more year*, he said. *We'll fertilize it and see how it goes. Let's give it another chance.*

Now, folks who heard Jesus tell this story would have known something that we might miss: a healthy fig tree usually begins to bear fruit in about three to five years. Three years is right on the edge of when a tree should be producing. So the owner apparently had been willing to give it the minimum time required to bear fruit, but no more. But the gardener saw the potential in the tree. He knew it still might bear fruit, if he took care of it. He was willing to wait.

There's something about this two-thousand-year-old parable that seems very modern to me. We live in a culture that focuses on productivity, just like the landowner in Jesus' story. In the workplace, in the family, in the community, and even in the church, we want to see results – we want to bear fruit – we want our hard work to pay off. We may see the landowner in the parable as a sort of God figure, demanding that we produce good fruit, so we work hard, bound and determined to be as productive as possible.

But what if the God figure in this parable isn't the landowner, but the gardener? That gives the story a whole different slant, doesn't it? Perhaps Jesus' lesson here is that fruit production requires time – patience - care. Perhaps the lesson is that fruitful living can't be rushed, but it can be nurtured. Perhaps the lesson is that God is patient with us – that God nurtures us – that God is a God of second chances. Sometimes we are like a fig tree that is already producing fruit, but sometimes we are in a dormant phase, being watered and fertilized and prepared for the time when the fruit will come. Sometimes we simply need to wait. And in our waiting, we need to accept God's gift of rest.

We all know, on one level, how important rest is for our mental and physical health. Our bodies are made for the rhythm of rest and work – rest and growth. But in what has been called our “grind culture”, rest is countercultural – waiting for results is countercultural. Capitalism normalizes and even glorifies overworking and determines one's worth based on results. You ask someone how they're doing, and what do you hear? *I'm just worn out. I've got so much going on. Work is crazy now that I'm in charge of the office, and the kids are so busy now that they're competing at such a high level, and I barely have time to try new recipes before company comes for dinner this*

*weekend or to finish knitting Norwegian protest hats for the No Kings rally on the 28<sup>th</sup>.* Busy, too busy, and yet proud of our busyness. How would we really feel if the response to “How are you doing?” would be *I’m feeling a lot better now that I’m taking a nap every day.* We may complain about how busy our lives are, but we may also look askance at folks who are not as busy as we are. It’s all too easy to buy into the idea that one’s worth depends on one’s productivity.

A few years ago, the New York Times ran an article about a woman named Tricia Henry who was wearing herself out studying theology and working on campus and interning and raising a young son. She was exhausted. Her grades and her health both suffered. And then she began building naps into her busy schedule, even if it meant she had less time to read or prepare for class. What happened? Her grades improved, her health improved, her ability to care for her son improved.

Henry points out what others before her have: Rest is resistance! “Your body is a site of liberation,” she wrote. “It doesn’t belong to capitalism.” Audre Lorde put it this way: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Perhaps if we really believed that resting our bodies would strengthen our political reach, we would prioritize rest. Maybe we would get better at waiting.

But you know what? I’m tired of waiting. I’m tired of praying for the divine realm to come on earth as it is in heaven, only to look around me and see the mess we humans have created. I’m tired of praying for peace, only to see the world at war. I’m tired of marching for justice, only to see laws ignored and people’s rights abused. When will the people beat the swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks? When will we see the day that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore? How long do we have to wait for the peaceful realm that the ancient prophets envisioned?

The Apostle Paul wrote that creation itself is “groaning with eager longing” for God’s healing to take root in the world. And so we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus” because we know that the world is not yet as God intends it to be. And we wait, trusting that God is already tending the soil of this world, preparing a harvest of justice and peace. We wait; we rest; and we work.

We do our part to make God’s intention for our world a reality, nurtured as we are by the divine gardener in the way of justice – the way of peace. The fruit that we bear is, as we read in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. These are not tasks to be accomplished, but rather the evidence of divine work in us as we walk in the way and in the Spirit of Jesus. Fruitfulness is a life rooted in Christ, shaped by the Spirit, and poured out in love to a hurting, hungry, and despairing world. It is not perfection. It is not production. It is the slow, steady ripening of a heart learning to live like Jesus – a life that tastes like mercy, looks like justice, and grows from a deep, abiding connection to God.

So slow down. Allow the patient gardener to tend to your needs. Open yourself to the divine spirit that is in you, that nurtures you, that shines the light of the sun on you and showers you with refreshing rain. Rest, as an act of political warfare; work, as the Spirit gives you the ability to make a difference in our world; and wait, in the confidence that the harvest will come.

Let the church say Amen.