

March 16, 2025

Second Sunday of Lent

“Trees that Bear Fruit”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 13:1-9;31-35

For most trees, the growth of leaves immediately follows winter: a time where nothing seems, to our eyes, to be happening, yet everything is in motion for the growth to occur. Maybe people are like that, too. We need periods of rest and inaction in order to take a next step. Even when it seems like nothing is happening in our lives, those are seasons when it's important to be nourishing ourselves, nonetheless - spiritually and physically. Because if we take good care during those times, then we set the stage for growth and newness to emerge, even when we can't predict when it will show up.

Like winter, those seasons of life are not very glamorous. Sometimes spiritual practices feel like drudgery; more like putting manure at the base of the tree than being on the mountaintop with God! But the Spirit is there even in that season, quietly doing her work deep inside to help us turn our hearts and lives toward God, little by little. So that soon, the wonder of spring can burst forth with growth and newness.

I learned something from last year's seed sowing. Too much waiting and not enough urgency gets you no seedlings. This year, I prepared for growth. Which, it turns out, requires a lot of prep, and then a lot of restful watching. I bought a heat pad, a grow lamp, peat pellets and a drip tray. I ordered the most beautiful seeds from my favorite seed catalogue. I set it all up in the corner of the living room. And just before Lent started, I planted tiny tomato seeds, some peppers, hollyhock and rudbeckia flowers. I figured out my watering routine and the number of hours to turn the light on them. Every day I spend more than a few minutes peering closely at the seeds in the dirt, just quietly watching them. I spritz them with a spray bottle. And by golly, they have started to grow! I have real, green seedlings. This is my Lenten practice - watching and waiting, tending and nurturing, scurrying to water and tend these tiny plants. Is that repentance? I don't know. But this practice is turning my heart toward the God who grows things in us; toward the God who tends us like a gardener, leading us toward joy and fruitfulness even in a barren and sorrowing world.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

I am an amateur gardener—very amateur. Last year I bought some new seeds for a beautiful new kind of coneflower. Those are perennials with the spiky centers and the light purple-pinkish petals. These seeds were called Green Twister, a coneflower variety supposed to offer electrifying green and magenta petals, bright like a neon sign. I sowed them on the ground in my wildflower bed after the last frost date and hoped for the best. Perhaps you can imagine what happened?! A big, fat nothing! They did not grow. No green shoots emerged from the ground. No beautiful blossoms. I was sad, and so was my daughter who had planted one of the seeds in the special clay flower pot she painted. ‘What a waste,’ I thought—of the seeds, and maybe more of my hopes for something beautiful to emerge! I can relate, a little bit, to the landowner who was upset at his tree for not producing figs. Though he and I both might have been a bit neglectful of our plants. I'm not sure I watered the seeds faithfully enough. I definitely didn't fertilize. The amount of energy I truly invested in that particular planting endeavor was little to none.

We visit a vineyard in Jesus' story today. And there, we encounter the landowner, the gardener, and oddly, a fig tree growing right in the middle of the grapevines. In Luke's telling, the fig tree represented a person meant to bear good fruit in the world, who needed to repent. Repent, as we say so often, does not mean to grovel on our knees feeling bad about ourselves, but means rather to turn. To turn toward God, to turn away from what does not give life, and to turn toward the things that help us flourish in faith. This fig tree was not flourishing. It's unclear the cause of the issue: the landowner who planted it in the wrong place, perhaps? The gardener who seems to have ignored it for a while? Or the soil that might lack nutrients or enough water? Whatever the problem was, the tree was not producing figs. It was not bearing fruit. When we think of the tree as more of a metaphor for people, we can see that it was not living into its purpose; it was not doing good in the world. And so, a reckoning was coming. The landowner first thought the tree should be cut down right away—‘let's go ahead and get rid of it!’ The gardener, though, suggested waiting, nurturing it a little, and checking on it again next year.

1 Justo L. Gonzalez, Luke, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 172.

2 Qtd. in Peter Wehner, “My problem was not with grief with a capital G. My problem was that Eric was dead,” March 2, 2025, New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/02/opinion/wolterstorff-god-faith-death.html?unlocked_article_code=1.004.tHKX.QV6qbKHWRLX&smid=url-share

3 Wehner, March 2, 2025.

4 “The third Sunday in Lent; Everything in between” *Sanctified Art, A Sermon Planning Guide for Lent*, 2024, 14.

The meaning of this parable is hard to pin down. Surely, there is probably more than one meaning anyway, as there are for most of Jesus' parables. If it's a story that invites us to turn our lives toward God, what does that look like? Should we race toward God right now—with the urgency and fear of a billboard that proclaims “repent or die!” Or should our turning toward God be more measured, filled with waiting and anticipation. Should we get busy and focus on growth in our spiritual lives? Or should we remember that times of rest often result in steady improvements over time?

We can ask these questions about ourselves and our lives of faith, imagining we are fig trees of a sort. And we might also ask these questions as we look out at the world—at all the fig trees—around us. When it feels like the ground is moving beneath our feet, everything seems urgent yet we have no idea what to do. We want to get busy and stand in the gap for those who are suffering, yet we may be waiting to see how we can really make a difference.

The only thing that's certain in this story is that fig trees are meant to bear fruit. This fig tree has not given any fruit. So the notion that it should be cut down is certainly one way to go to get rid of the problem—whether now or later. But tending the tree and trying to coax some fruit out of it is another. This parable might remind us that trees that are poor and struggling require extra attention in order to even have the possibility to thrive. Gardeners don't just nourish healthy plants, they especially take time to help ones that are struggling. As Justo Gonzalez says, “The fig tree is receiving special care because it has yet to give the fruit it was meant to bear.”¹ The trees that are scrawny and ill-formed should not be cast aside because they're suffering; they ought to be cared for more deeply so that they can thrive. It's not much of a leap to transfer this line of thinking from plants and trees, to our Christian call to serve our neighbors in need.

Peter Wehner, an opinion writer for the New York Times and a Presbyterian, recently interviewed Nicholas Wolterstorff, who is a well-known philosopher, a Christian, and a Michigander. Wolterstorff explained why, as a philosopher, he finds Christianity compelling, in particular the incarnation and suffering of Jesus:

“God became part of our history, part of our humanity, but did so not by being a king, a potentate, but by being a child, impoverished, poor, maligned and so forth. [The incarnation of Jesus was] God siding with the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens [which means immigrants.]”² Wehner summed up Wolterstorff's thoughts this way: “What's powerful for you [about Christian faith] is not just God entering into history, but it's [God] entering history on the side of the downtrodden, the social outcast. It's that kind of solidarity with people who the world itself has often turned against, the notion of the creator God having solidarity with the least of these.”³

We see God act that way over and over again in scripture and in the ministry of Jesus. God intervenes to help the poor, the widow, the immigrant and the outcast. All those remind us of this poor fig tree, all alone among the vines, failing to produce fruit, and teetering on the edge of being cut down completely. Wouldn't it be just like God to know that this tree needs more attention, not less? That this one, out of all the trees, requires an extra measure of God's compassion and nurture in order to thrive.

Now, some of us may be those trees in need of extra assistance and care. And some of us may be gardeners, seeing trees around us who need our devotion. Whether we are giving or receiving care, there is some sense of urgency about it. Without that attention, thriving may not be possible. But the urgency is not just pressure to grow, grow, grow! We can act urgently yet carefully, giving trees what they've always needed: nutrients, water, and attention until they can thrive on their own. There are plenty of problems we cannot solve these days. But if we can act with some urgency, as well as careful attention, to ensure that the people around us have the basics: food, water, shelter, and loving care, then that goes a long way toward helping them thrive, too. Toward helping them to bear fruit in God's world.

When we imagine ourselves as the fig trees, then we know that we also have a role to play in thriving, in turning ourselves toward God. Sometimes our faith stagnates, not because we lack nutrients and nourishment, but because of our own choices. Sometimes we choose too much rest and waiting around, rather than leaning into actions that could help us grow. And other times, we push too hard toward staying busy and making things happen. As one commentator says, “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.”⁴ We probably should aim more for the center, finding a balance between rest and growth.

Last weekend my family went to the Michigan State Maplefest at Tollgate Farm over in Novi. We learned all about turning sugar maple sap into maple syrup. We learned that the time to collect sap is right in between winter and spring; right in between freezing nights and warmer days. When temperatures warm up, the sugars that have been stored in the tree's roots begin to thaw and move up toward the branches once again. But the cool nights mean the trees are still wintering, resting, and the sap freezes again because the tree doesn't yet need it to grow. This in-between point is when the sap runs and can be collected for sugaring without hurting the tree. When the warmth of spring arrives in full and the temperatures start to go up and up, that's when the tree begins to grow; it then requires all those sugars to begin to bud and you can't take the sap anymore without hurting the tree. There is a literal sweet spot to tap the maple trees, right in between their cycles of rest and growth.