

6 Jesus told this parable: “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’ 8 The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. 9 Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’”
-Common English Bible

This little parable is a head scratcher, as most parables are. Did the vineyard owner plant the fig tree? Did he know anything about proper planting of fig trees? Why did he plant it, or have it planted, in a vineyard? It sounds like he did nothing to care for the tree except to check it once a year for fruit. Sounds like my relationship to a pear tree in our backyard in Nashville. In any case, it is clear that for a fig tree to produce fruit it takes time and care and nurture and perhaps prior to this moment only time had been applied. A caring gardener appeals to the vineyard owner to give her one more year to carefully tend the tree before resorting to cutting it down.

Why did Jesus tell this story and what are we to make of it? In context, Jesus is talking about the importance of repentance, of changed hearts and lives, change that leads to fruitful lives in whatever time we are blessed to have on this planet. It is a parable about patience, God’s patience, but is also a parable about finitude. We have time to change our hearts and lives, but not an infinite amount of time. I spent time the past few weeks with a family who tragically lost a husband and father way too soon almost 20 years ago and now have lost a mother sooner than seems right or fair. I suspect anyone who knows this family has been invited to reflect on your own mortality and vulnerability in light of their tragic losses. I’ve also spent time recently with people who have had near death experiences who are now more invested in their spirituality and seeking to make meaningful use of whatever time they have. I heard a young person say this week that the only thing that really scares her is death. There’s something about our finitude and mortality that sharpens our thinking and can motivate us or focus us.

Here’s the thing though, fear is a lousy motivator. Often existential anxiety leads to wheel spinning, to a whole lot of busy-ness that does little to facilitate growth and

progress. And right now, no matter our personal circumstances, there's so much existential anxiety in the air; it's hard not to breathe it in and be affected by it. And it can feel like we're moving backwards in our faith journeys right when we most need to move forward.

When fear is rising, rest and care is needed. Sometimes fear makes us think we can't possibly pause to rest because there's so much to do and so little time. But, if we don't rest and nurture ourselves appropriately, there will be limits on what we are able to do with whatever time we have. Part of the vision of St. A's is to cultivate opportunities, in our busy lives, to reflect, rest, and find balance. In general, our culture discourages such healthy balance. We run ourselves ragged in our working years and hope to find rest in retirement... some day. And some of you who are retired have commented that you find yourselves busier in retirement than you ever were in your working years. At whatever stage of life we're in, we all need regular rhythms of rest and work, practices that allow us to tap into deep rest in any given week, perhaps daily, or at least once weekly. It's a commandment, but really it's a gift; it's a need; it's an invitation.

There's a woman who has developed a nap ministry. Perhaps you read about her in the NY Times awhile back. Her name is Tricia Hersey and they call her the nap bishop. She stages collective napping and daydreaming events around the country, giving tired people the time and space to rest. People often wake up from naps at her gatherings crying over the profundity of giving themselves permission to rest. Tricia writes "We are sleep-deprived because the systems view us as machines. Our bodies are not machines. Our bodies are a site for liberation."

What does this have to do with a fig tree? Well, I think that if our hearts or souls are fig trees, meant to bear fruit, then rest is part of the nurture we need if we are to be fruitful. And I think it's worth acknowledging that the threat of being cut down, cut off, ended, can be a hindrance to rest. And all the pressures of life in a late global capitalist system are a hindrance to rest. And all the chaos of life on a planet on fire is a hindrance to rest. And, yet, navigating all of this requires immense rest.

Allow me to close with a prayer titled "For when resting feels like too great a risk" from Black Liturgies, an account on instagram:

Rested God,

We want more than a life lived exhausted. That you have woven healing rhythms of rest into our minds and bodies reminds us we are worthy of habitual restoration. Remind us that when we pause or rest, we are restoring not only our own bodies but the very condition of a world held captive by greed and utility. We grow weary of societies who view us as more machine than human, more product than soul. The fear that we won't survive without overworking stalks our days. Liberate us from the depraved socioeconomic structures that require that the poor and vulnerable sacrifice their own rest at the altar of survival and opportunity. Remind us that the beauty and paradox of our humanness is that we were made to close our eyes, that we might see. May it be so.

Sources in addition to scripture that were cited in or influenced this sermon:

The focus on the relationship between rest and growth is that which A Sanctified Art drew out of this parable. www.sanctifiedart.org

The prayer and the quote from Tricia Hersey both were found on the black liturgies account on instagram. https://www.instagram.com/blackliturgies/p/CytJeFLugEF/?img_index=6

"The Nap Bishop Is Spreading the Good Word: Rest," by Melonyce McAfee. The New York Times. October 13, 2022. [nytimes.com/2022/10/13/well/live/nap-ministry-bishop-tricia-hersey.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/13/well/live/nap-ministry-bishop-tricia-hersey.html)

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