

Rest & Growth
Series: Everything in Between
Luke 13:6–9
Sunday, March 23, 2025 (Lent 3)

Let us pray: Lord, may your word take root in us and grow, producing fruit that will nourish the world, in Christ. Amen.

In the 1860s a German chemist named August Kekulé was trying to figure out the structure of the benzene molecule. I know that probably doesn't sound very exciting to most of us, but at the time, scientists just could not figure this out. It was a total mystery. They knew that benzene was made up of six hydrogen atoms and six carbon atoms, but they *could not figure out* how those atoms fit together. None of their existing models worked. They were used to molecules being *linear*, the atoms connecting in a straight chain. But benzene didn't work that way.

Kekulé spent years of intense study trying to figure this out. He worked only on benzene, day after day, night after night, for *years*. Well, one night, he wasn't getting anywhere, so he decided to go to sleep. And while he was sleeping, he had a dream in which two snakes were eating each other's tails (so they formed a ring). He woke up and thought, "What if instead of connecting in a straight line, the atoms in benzene were connected in a ring, like those two snakes?" He tried it out, and it worked. It was a *huge* breakthrough that transformed the world of organic chemistry. That might not sound like a big deal to us, but because of that dream, we now have aspirin and ibuprofen and cancer therapies and plastic bottles and so many other things that we use every day.

I read one author that put it this way, "Kekulé's breakthrough came, not while he was racking his brain, actively engaged in his work, but during a period of mental rest in which his subconscious could piece together ideas in a new way. Sometimes stepping back or taking a period of rest can lead to growth and

breakthroughs—even in the most challenging problems. Rest and pauses in our lives aren't wasted time, but rather opportunities for our thoughts to incubate and develop.”

Sometimes stepping back or taking a period of rest can lead to growth and breakthroughs.

Throughout the season of Lent, we are looking at the dichotomies of life and faith; how so much in our world is talked about in terms of either/or, black and white, this or that, with no room in between. You're either all one thing or all the other, you're either *with* me or *against* me, a friend or an enemy, a stranger or a neighbor; faith is either about what we *believe* or what we *do*. And we come to another dichotomy today in rest and growth. We touched on this some last week in the story of Mary and Martha, a story in which you're either *being* or *doing*; we're either sitting at the feet of Jesus listening like Mary, or we're busy serving him like Martha. You're either resting or growing.

We live in an on-demand, instant gratification culture, in which our value and our worth is defined by what we *produce*. And if we aren't *producing* anything, then we aren't *worth* very much. I've talked to so many people over the years for whom this is the challenge they face when they retire. “If I'm not working and producing, then who am I? What's my identity? What is my worth?” The culture in which we live says that we are either *doing something* and *growing*, or we are *resting* and doing *nothing*. But Jesus (and in fact *all of scripture*) does not buy into that dichotomy. Our faith teaches that rest and growth go hand in hand. If you want to *grow*, you have to *rest*. That is exactly what we see in this parable that Jesus tells about the unproductive fig tree.

This is a *strange* parable, for a lot of reasons. A man has a fig tree planted in his vineyard. Well, why did he do *that*? Fig trees don't go in vineyards. Vineyards are for grape vines, not trees. There's a chance that the vines will take over the tree and choke it out. We'll come back to that. The fig tree gets planted

in the vineyard, and the man goes looking for fruit on it, but he doesn't find any. For three years, he looks for fruit on this tree, but there isn't any. Well, that's not entirely surprising. Fig trees usually take several years to start bearing fruit. But this man is done waiting. He says to the gardener who tends the vineyard, "Cut it down! It's not bearing any fruit. It's just wasting soil." The gardener says, "Leave it there for one more year. I'll fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, great! If not, you can cut it down."

And that's the end of the parable. We never find out what happens to the tree. Does the gardener's plan work, and the tree starts bearing fruit? Does it not work, and the tree gets cut down? Does the landowner even agree to give it another year? We don't know. This story has no resolution. But the resolution – what *happens* to the fig tree – is not the point.

Usually in a parable, the people in the story represent something else. One of the most common understandings of this parable goes like this. The man who owns the vineyard and has the fig tree planted there is God. The fig tree represents Israel (there are quite a few places in the Old Testament where the fig tree is a symbol for Israel; Jeremiah 8 even talks about Israel as a fig tree with no figs on it). And Jesus is the gardener. God plants the people of Israel and expects them to bear good fruit. But when God doesn't *find* any good fruit in them, God wants to get rid of them. Jesus says, "Hang on. Give them a little more time. I'll work with them. If they end up bearing fruit, great. If not, then you can get rid of them."

It is *thought* that is what Jesus had in mind when he was telling this parable. And that interpretation *fits* with other parables that Jesus tells in Luke, where he says to the Jewish religious leaders, "Unless you bear good fruit, then the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to others" (there are other parables where a vineyard represents the kingdom of God). So they will be cut down, and someone else will be planted in the vineyard. And that understanding fits with what happens right before Jesus

tells this parable, where he was talking about some people that died, and he says, “Unless you repent, you will perish just as they did.”

So this is a parable about repentance; about turning things around and bearing good fruit. Obviously, we are not the people of Israel, but the message still holds true for us. God expects us to bear good fruit. If we do *not*, then the kingdom of God will be taken away from *us*. But Jesus is the gardener who lovingly tends us so that we *will* bear good fruit. The point of this parable is not what happens to the fig tree, whether or not it starts bearing good fruit. This parable does not have a resolution, because *we get to decide how it resolves*. We get to choose whether our lives will bear the good fruit that God wants.

One of the major points of this parable is found in the gardener. The gardener knows that this fig tree needs to produce fruit. And the gardener *also* knows that the fig tree needs rest and nutrients and time. Both things are true. And both things are true for *us*. *We* are called to produce good fruit, like it says in Ephesians, “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.” Just like trees have a purpose, *we* have a purpose, and that purpose is to bear God’s fruit in this world. In order to *do* that, we need rest and nutrients and time. Jesus our gardener knows that *rest* can lead to *growth*.

August Kekulé had to step away from his work to rest, and that led to growth.

After you exercise, you have to rest, because that gives your muscles time to rebuild, and that’s what leads to growth.

Farmers can’t just keep planting the same things in the same fields year after year. They have to let their fields lie fallow for a year and rest, because that gives the soil time to replenish and restore lost nutrients.

Jesus regularly stepped away from his work of teaching and healing people to spend time resting and being nourished by God.

Even God took a break from creating existence and rested on the seventh day.

If we are always working and going and striving for growth, we will burn out. If we are only ever resting, we won't bear fruit or grow. We have to take a break from the constant going and doing to spend time being nourished by God, because that is what leads to growth and helps us bear good fruit.

Maybe another reason that the fig tree was planted in a vineyard (where it doesn't belong) is because we are called to bear fruit in a place that is not always conducive to it. In a world that is driven by productivity and instant results, a world that expects constant growth, a culture in which we are defined by what we *do*, stepping back and taking a break from our work and resting is seen as *doing nothing*.

But when the gardener suggests letting the tree rest, that is not doing nothing. The gardener is digging around it and fertilizing it. And beneath the surface, where we cannot see, there is a whole lot of work going on. Worms burrow tunnels that nourish and aerate the soil. Organic matter decomposes into life-giving nutrients. Rainfall seeps down to water the roots. During that time of rest, a whole lot is happening that leads to growth.

And so with us, when *we* take time to rest and let our gardener tend to us, it's not doing nothing. When we take time to read scripture, to pray, to worship, to listen to music that draws us into God's presence, to go for a walk and appreciate the handiwork of our creator, to spend time with our family and friends and be reminded of God's love for us; when we just sit back and close our eyes and breathe and spend time with our Lord, there is a whole lot happening beneath the surface that leads to growth.

What is your relationship with rest? Do you prioritize it or neglect it? Do you struggle with hyperproductivity? Do you feel like you always have to be on the move, going and doing? What parts of your life and faith could be transformed by taking time to rest and just *be* with God and the people you love?

What is your relationship with growth? Do you embrace the opportunity to learn and change? Or do you tend to *avoid* growth and change? What parts of your life and faith could be transformed by leaning in to a challenge or a change and trusting God to do something new in you?

We do not have to choose between rest and growth. God calls us to both. Because you can't have one without the other. Whatever growth or breakthrough or transformation you are working on or waiting for, remember that growth takes time. Maybe you need to step away from it for a bit and let our master gardener tend the soil of your soul, so that when the time is right, you can bear good fruit in Jesus' name. Amen.