

“Out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.” God planted more trees, more fruit-bearing trees, in the Garden of Eden than the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. From the beginning, God planted fig trees in the Garden of Paradise.

It’s hidden in plain sight, the fig trees of Eden, until Adam and Eve sewed leaves from Eden’s fig trees to cover the shame of their catastrophic sin. God had given all the fruits of the garden for food—save one. Not the fig trees, but the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Ever since our ancient parents sewed fig leaves for clothes, the fig tree has been woven into our redemption story. It’s an instance when a tree is more than tree. And the fig tree—its fruit and leaves—becomes a symbol with multiple meanings.

When the people of Israel start to suffer from hunger and thirst in the wilderness after the Exodus, they complain to Moses, “We would rather have died in Egypt than this dreadful place. At least we had grain and figs and vines and pomegranates back in Egypt.”

Earlier we read about Moses’ encounter with God the I AM in the burning bush at Mt Sinai. When God rescued Israel from their agony in Egypt, Moses brought them to a good and broad land, after forty years of desert wanderings.

Deuteronomy 8.7-8: “For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and *fig trees* and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.” Where fig trees had been a figure of shame and judgment in Eden, in the wilderness, now they would be signs of God’s abundant grace.

Now the figure of the fig tree isn’t superior to other symbolic forms in Scripture. It’s just that this symbol persists from Genesis to Revelation. Certainly you can read the saga of scripture in fresh and exciting ways were you to trace other symbols such as water, bread, wine, or oil, as well.

But today is a day when we hear a parable from Jesus about a fig tree. And it sure helps to know this parable is a micro-story within a much larger story—a saga. This short parable is rooted in the ancient soil of Israel’s land *and* her history *and* her destiny.

Luke leads us to Jesus' parable of the fig tree by way of an earlier episode with John the Baptist. When crowds came to the Jordan for baptism, John the Baptist declared, 'Bear fruits in keeping with repentance!¹...Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!'

With his fiery warnings, John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus' parables about repentance, like the story of the unfruitful fig tree. Just as John warned the crowds, Jesus told this parable to warn the crowds of *their* unrepentance. That's an important feature of this story—it's not just a story for hypocritical religious and political leaders. Jesus isn't just calling out Israel's elite. This is a story for the masses, for the nation.

Just before Jesus tells this story, he talks about two tragic national events—the murder of Galilean Jews by Pilate in the Temple and the death of eighteen people when the Tower of Siloam fell in Jerusalem. Jesus' response to these horrible events surprises us. Twice—one for each tragedy—Jesus speaks about the urgency of repentance: 'unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.' Difficult and direct words from the Lord.

But this is how we're meant to hear Jesus' parable—this is a story about the urgency of repentance. You cannot be assured of tomorrow. You will not have forever to return to the Lord. Today is the day of salvation. And Jesus tells this story to *everyone*. This is a matter of urgency for the whole nation.

Return with me to Luke 13:6-9 on page [] of your pew Bible. There are a few ways to understand the characters of this parable. Who is the owner? Who is the vinedresser/gardener? I tend to understand the owner of the vineyard as the Father and the Son as the gardener.

Now notice the method of intervention for this fig tree. There is no fruit on the branches. If the problem were a few diseased limbs, a farmer would prune those branches. Jesus speaks about pruning branches in other places, but this isn't one of them. The gardener doesn't treat or prune the limbs. He looks under the earth. He digs around the tree, exposing the roots. He removes dead or diseased soil, replenishing the soil with fresh manure—organic material.

Let's leave the fig trees ancient Palestine for a moment and think about our

¹ Luke 3:8

East Tennessee soil. If you turn over the earth for new plants in the coming weeks, you will certainly have a Lenten experience of spiritual humility when you begin contending with East Tennessee clay.

But actually not all ‘clay’ is alike. Soil scientists would say that we often confuse clay for an issue known as soil compaction. In other words, it may be more accurate to say we have ‘dead soil’ than to call it ‘clay.’ Over the years soil compacts and settles, effectively choking itself from essential nutrients for growth. Worms, oxygen, water, and minerals cannot freely move in dead soil. And if those nutrients can’t move, the roots become diseased. But when a gardener turns over dead soil and mixes new, living soil, the roots of a tree or plant have access to fresh oxygen, water, and minerals, promoting growth.

Lent is the season when Christ gets to the root of things, *for the sake of reviving the threatened and diseased roots in our souls*. We have to go beneath the surface of things in Lent. Yes, we address physical temptations in Lent such as food, drink, and lust. But there’s always a deeper longing underneath the sins of the flesh. Every sin, every temptation begins with a desire of the soul, not the flesh. As G.K. Chesterton famously said, ‘Every man knocking on the door of a brothel is looking for God.’

We cannot take physical temptations lightly, but we also must grow wise regarding *spiritual* temptations and sins. Spiritual temptations lie beneath the surface, working slowly over time to cut off the soul from life-giving nutrients it needs to survive and grow—the Word of God, the love of God, the power of the Holy Spirit.

For the remainder of my remarks, I want to very briefly ‘dig out’ three sins—not of the body—but of the spirit, hidden beneath the surface of our 21st century lives. Call the soil whatever you wish—Western culture, secularism, our technological age. These are the deadening agents in the soil where our lives and our souls are planted in the world.

The three sins or diseases of the spirit we must ‘unearth’ with repentance are: restlessness, fear, and vainglory. To be sure there are more than these, but if we dig around and repent of these three sins, the Lord will revive our souls at its roots. Repentance in each of these places promises fresh water, oxygen, and

nutrients of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Number one: the sin of restlessness. This spiritual temptation constantly whispers in the soul that we are always missing out. FOMO is a prevailing acronym of our time—fear of missing out. Rooted in that fear is an interior restlessness that peace and joy are never found in the present moment, in my present circumstances, but always somewhere else. Someone else’s job, home, or relationship is clearly better than my life. Restlessness distrusts roots and stability, because stability isn’t exciting.

Restlessness also reveals itself in boredom. It seems like the more devices and technologies we develop, the greater we experience boredom. We feel like life should always be thrilling. So we become more restless, looking for an always-exciting life, where we never miss out on fun.

This sin may be a deadening agent in the spiritual soil of Western culture, but it’s not a new sin. The desert fathers called it acedia. Acedia or Acedia. Tomato/ Tomato. Acedia draws us into a general malaise, and in that malaise we change from place to place, not because we’re following God’s will, but because we’re restless and fishing for peace.

So what does repentance from acedia look like? Contentment. Stability. If you find a person who has found contentment in their soul, learn from her/him. They are a pearl of great price in our time.

The patron saint of contentment in our Anglican tradition is Jeremy Taylor, who said this: ‘Enjoy the blessings of this day, if God sends them, and the evils of it bear patiently and sweetly; for this day is only ours: we are dead to yesterday, and we are not yet born to the morrow.’ That is holy contentment.

You likely know the beloved verse St Paul wrote: ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’ But he finds strength by embracing contentment first. He writes to the Philippians: ‘I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.’ Holy contentment kills restlessness and brings oxygen to the soul.

Secondly, the sin of fear. But first a disclaimer: the evil spirit of fear is *not* the same reality as clinical anxiety. Anxiety and panic disorders must be treated with compassion, care, and skill by those professionally *and* spiritually trained in these conditions. No one chooses to have an anxiety disorder. But with the spiritual temptation of fear, we have a choice. That's the difference.

The spirit of fear tempts us to take control of what we cannot control. The evil spirit of fear says that uncertainty is intolerable and unacceptable. Fear ultimately throws us back on ourselves: we must save ourselves. We have fears about the future of our country, the future of the church in America, the future of the Anglican Communion, the future of younger generations.

I quote saints regarding spiritual temptations because they are master gardeners for us when we suffer from deadened and compacted soil. So St John Climacus says of fear: 'Fear is danger tasted in advance, a quiver as the heart takes fright before unnamed calamity. Fear is loss of assurance.'

And where is our assurance and confidence in all uncertainty? '[Jesus Christ] ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.' To repent of fear is to trust God alone and surrender all control to Him. To cast all our cares upon him.

St John Climacus helps us again: 'Repentance is the daughter of hope and the refusal to despair.' Repent of the spirit of fear and our souls will be nourished with the nutrients of hope in the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we come to the third spiritual sin: vainglory. We're accustomed to speaking about pride, but this spiritual vice with an archaic name—vainglory—is different and it seems to be making quite a comeback. Pride wants to always be right, to be better than everyone else; vainglory wants to always be praised and admired, more visible than anyone else.

It has been said that in the 1990s and early 2000s, authenticity was the virtue most esteemed in American life. But another desire has replaced authenticity in this decade—visibility. It's compacting and deadening the spiritual soil so much

we don't realize its effects on us.

Here it would be fairly predictable for the preacher to launch a rant on technology and social media. But even a rant on social media could prove shallow. The problem with vainglory has much less to do with our devices and much more with how much we love ourselves. An Instagram feed can either be a platform for vainglory, or it can be a tool to praise and esteem others, to celebrate the glory of God's world, to shine light on holy moments.

Vainglory would have us believe that happiness comes with visibility, recognition, admiration. Vainglory is a sugar crash—it tastes sweet for a moment, then you crash. And then you want more. But there's no nutritional value in sugar and you can never enough. Until you become nauseous, of course.

To repent of vainglory is to love God and find glory only in the cross. Here is where the spiritual soil around the soul really loosens and becomes loamy with spiritual goodness. Rejecting personal glory for the glory of the cross leads us to freedom and abundant life.

Such was the case with George Herbert. George Herbert adopted this motto for himself: 'less than the least of God's mercies.' Herbert had all the opportunity and pedigree for a life in the king's court. He served briefly in Parliament and then resigned his seat at a time when England certainly needed wise statesmen. England endured massive civil strife in Herbert's lifetime, a political and religious conflict that ultimately led to the English Civil War.

George Herbert could have had an influential position in the king's court, like his brother, Edward, who became Lord Herbert of Cherbury. George Herbert could have become a bishop like Lancelot Andrews or a royal preacher like John Donne.

Instead, Herbert chose to become a country parish priest in a little village called Bemerton, far from the political halls of Parliament or the king's palace. He believed that the parish church of St Andrew's Bemerton was the best way to labor for the moral reformation of England.

He didn't even serve as rector at Bemerton for three years. He died at the age of 39. In the days prior to his death, he sent a 'little book' to his dear friend, Nicholas Farrer, summarizing the writings as 'a picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my Soul, before I could subject mine

to the will of Jesus my Master.’ Herbert asked Ferrer to publish the book, ‘if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor Soul.’

That little book was a volume called *The Temple*, a manual of pastoral theology and the collection of George Herbert’s poems. The poems we sing in the form of hymns. The poems you read in high school English. The poems that brought and bring spiritual renewal to an entire nation. All from a man who renounced vainglory so that his soul (and his nation) might be healed.

Yes, time and culture and sin can compound the spiritual soil around our souls. But we have a choice against these temptations. For the attacks of acedia, we can choose contentment and faith. For the spirit of fear, we can choose hope. For the spirit of vainglory, we can prefer the love and glory of Christ to all other things. For Christ does not dig deep to judge and condemn us, but to send oxygen, water, and nutrients to our souls so we bear fruit in his kingdom.

It was said in the days of Solomon that Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, *every man under his vine and under his fig tree*. And the prophet Micah also said of God’s eternal kingdom that “[they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid.” So you see, there’s nothing to be afraid of in repentance. Only good fruit, pleasing to the eye and good food for the soul. Only life and health and joy and freedom in the presence of God whose Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.