If you walk a few blocks from here, over to 19th and Q streets, you will find a community garden next to a light-rail bridge. Lori and I have a four-foot-by-eight-foot plot in this community garden. We’ve been tending our little patch of earth for the past three seasons – this will be our fourth season.

Actually, I should say, it’s Lori’s garden. She tends to this tiny piece of real estate as if it were the gardens of Versailles, which in a way, it is.

And I do as she directs.

This time of year, we turn over the soil and add compost. The compost comes from table scraps that we put in a rotating compost drum in our backyard. Nothing goes to waste in our kitchen. The table scraps turn into black loamy humus, rich in nutrients and nitrogen which plants need to grow.

Come summer, our community garden will be bursting with beans, squash, cucumbers, and all sorts of heirloom tomatoes.

Not for nothing is Sacramento called “The Big Tomato.”

One of the delights in our community garden is seeing what other gardeners plant in their plots – and that is part of what makes it a community garden.

Some have big artichokes, with pointy leaves that spread like wings on a giant bird. Many gardens have a few flowers – we have a geranium growing in a corner of our plot.

There are also a couple of plots designated as communal, and everyone is responsible for their care.

In one of these plots is a fig tree. It is a young tree, put there when the community garden opened three years ago, and last season if bore fruit. Everyone cares for that fig tree, and everyone shares in the fruit.

In this morning’s gospel lesson, we hear gardening advice about a fig tree. This brief passage seems oddly placed, coming at the end of a cascade of grim, stern biblical lessons, including Moses cowering before God on the Holy Mountain, and Saint Paul chastising his followers about “sexual immorality.”

By the way, the phrase “sexual immorality” is an imprecise translation of the Greek word πορνεία [proneia] from which we get the word “prostitution.”

So, what does a fig tree have to do with any of this? If you are confused, stay with me here.

The key to unlocking all these biblical lessons, I believe, is the fig tree.
In ancient Israel, when people heard about a fig tree, they immediately knew what this meant. This may be lost on our ears, but in ancient Israel they knew exactly what Jesus is talking about.

Fig trees are symbols of religious wisdom and meaning. The rabbis sit under a fig tree while teaching – the fig tree becomes a symbol of the rabbis. Remember that the disciples addressed Jesus as “rabbi” – or teacher.

The fruit of the tree – figs – are symbols for the fruits of religious teaching. A fig tree devoid of fruit is religion devoid of meaning. Rabbi Jesus says cut it down if it bears no fruit.

Adding soil to a fig tree is an apt symbol for how to tend to our inner spiritual life. Give the fig tree nutrition – give our souls food – and wait for the fruit.

We can add soil to our souls from the experiences of our life – our joys and sorrows; our insights and worries; our traumas and triumphs.

Even the little stuff – the scraps of life – our shopping list and chores around the house – all that is the stuff that can feed our inner life. All this is the rich earthy soil of our being.

Rachel Carson, in her 1962 landmark book, Silent Spring, devoted an entire chapter to soil, and you could also hear in her words a metaphor for our inner spiritual life.

“The soil exists in a state of constant change,” she writes, “taking part in cycles that have no beginning and no end. New materials are constantly being contributed.”

Rachel Carson also wrote of how poisons – pesticides and herbicides – can destroy soil and bring catastrophe to all life above ground. Her book changed the world and the way we look at it.

Think of Rachel Carson’s warning also as a warning for our spiritual life. There are things we do in our outer life than can poison our inner life – that is Saint Paul’s basic point in his scold-y passage.

Behaviors that corrupt the world – and Paul lists quite a few – can corrupt our souls, and the corruption of our soul will corrupt the world.

Our inner life has everything to do with how we act in the world. The fig tree in our garden – our outer self – grows because of the care we have taken with the soil beneath the ground – our inner self.

In fact, there is no separation between our inner and outer self – like a fig tree, each cannot exist without the other, just as there is no separation between roots of the fig tree underground and branches and fruit of the tree above the ground.

Lent is a time for tending to our whole self. What inside you needs tending, and maybe new soil? Take time to notice what is going on inside you.

As you do, pay attention to what is going on outside you. That which is harming or hurting you, or hurting others, prune it away. That is the meaning of repentance.

How we behave – how we act – is deeply rooted in our inner life. What are your true values? Do our values reflect the values of Rabbi Jesus and the holy within us, or something else?

Think of everything we do as a prayer. What is it that you pray for by how you live?

Jesus calls us to be disciples, to bring healing to everything we do. We are called to merciful to those in need, to bring justice and peace to all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. These are the pledges of discipleship in our baptismal covenant.

We cannot do any of this if we neglect our inner self. Our roots below the surface of our being and the tree above are inseparable.

To close, I’d like to mention one more thing I’ve learned about trees. Above ground, trees stand all by themselves. Forests are made up of individual trees, and each tree is unique.

But below ground, there is much going on hidden from our view. Scientists, in fact, have discovered that trees communicate with each other through their intertwined roots, sending chemical and electrical signals to each other.2

Trees can warn each other of creeping toxic chemicals, or an invasive plant entering their ecosystem, and even route nutrients to a sick tree.

Our inner life is like the roots of trees. We are unique individuals standing above ground,

But our souls are intertwined. We are connected in ways that are sometimes hidden, but connected we are.

When I can’t pray – when I am empty, others are praying for me. When you are feeling empty, others are praying for you.

We grow like a fig tree, our lives taking root with each other, nourished by the soil deep within us, and the Holy Spirit connecting and sustaining each of us always. AMEN

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2 https://e360.yale.edu/features/exploring_how_and_why_trees_talk_to_each_other