

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

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When tragedy happens people often have one question on their mind, why? So we send scientists, engineers and investigative reporters to find out. They provide an explanation of what they think occurred and alternatives for what went wrong to cause the tragedy. But the scientists cannot answer the deeper questions, why this group of people, why not me? Is there something that makes those who perish different? If I'm still alive am I blessed in some way?

Some take these questions to a place of judgment, saying yes, there is something different about those who perish. Their motives and behavior are questioned. We wonder how they could have done things differently. This process was noticeable recently, when a group of students was killed by a tornado in Alabama. Many wondered why they were still at the school. A number of people asked why didn't the busses take them home. We want quick answers so our lives can be neat and tidy. As much as we say we want to avoid judgment, it is firmly planted in our thoughts because it makes things easier. We wonder why bad things happen to good people and come up with they answer, they don't. Bad things only happen to bad people. And we might want a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Our head demands an answer and we sometimes think that using reason will solve all the questions.

Jesus tries to stop this kind of thinking dead in its tracks. He refutes the connection between sin and suffering. He asks the crowd, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" He answers with a short answer, a resounding, NO. I can imagine that some breathed a sigh of relief. Jesus knows and we also know, blaming the victim never helps anyone. Analyzing this answer, however, may not be good news to some because as Barbara Brown Taylor states, this answer is meant not to aid reason but to disarm it. In an intervention aimed below his listeners' heads, Jesus touches the panic inside of them about all the awful things that are happening around them. They are terrified by those things -- for good reason. They have searched their hearts for any bait that might bring disaster sniffing their way. They have lain awake at night making lists of their mistakes. Jesus seems to honor the vulnerability that their fright has opened up in them. It is not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark -- not if it makes them turn toward the light. Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

Jesus' answer to us does not stop with the no. He continues with a but. And like when others say but, what comes after the but may not be something we want to hear. Jesus says, "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did". We may not want to face the reality of repentance, but when you look at the subject of the readings today, it cannot be avoided. We may enter the subject of repentance with our feet dragging but we are going to go there anyways because we are in the middle of a season that focuses on repentance and turning back towards God.

So what do you think about when you hear the word repentance. Some may think that it means saying you are sorry for what you have done. That is part of it, but not the complete story. We can say I'm sorry and not really mean it. For example, while working with the kids in the treatment facility, many of them would say I'm sorry after getting into a verbal or physical fight with someone. But a couple of days later, they would do the same thing again. After a while I would tell them, "please don't say I'm sorry anymore because when you keep doing the same thing over and over, it is hard to believe you are sorry". One of the children I told this to is Amy. Amy was a seventeen year old who was severely abused and basically abandoned by her family. She had a low IQ so even though she was seventeen, she functioned more like a 12 year old and emotionally she was probably much younger than that. She would come to group and take any comment made by other personally, even if the comment was not about her. She would stomp out of the room and go running back to the unit. When she got back to the unit, she would bang her head on the wall, usually to the point of making her head bleed. If staff tried to prevent her from banging her head, she would sometimes become aggressive towards them. I met with Amy individually at least once week and I would the staff would call me when she was in crisis. Her therapist and I came up with a plan to increase her self-esteem and learn some new coping skills when she became frustrated. Over time, Amy seemed to be able to handle other's comments better. She participated in groups and worship and would usually stay for the whole thing. We even had a special ceremony of baptism and welcoming her to the church. Amy reduced her aggression and started to spend a lot less time banging her head. She didn't just say I'm sorry, she changed her behavior. And when Amy was discharged, I have to say that I was sad to see her go.

We are probably not full of problem behaviors like Amy but we all have things we could change. Usually we like to think that this process takes time. But Jesus implies there is a sense of urgency. Luke's gospel in chapters 12 and thirteen contain many stories and parables urging the hearers to be ready, you do not know when the Son of God will return. During this season of Lent, we are asked to pay special attention to these things, not to make us just feel bad but to become free of them. Because when we pay special attention to working through our problems we are able to let them go, giving us more energy to place our attention towards God. God wants to have a relationship with us and we all know that a relationship where one of the partners is not talking does not last very long. To address this tension between being given time and urgency, Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree. This tree had been standing for at least three years without producing fruit. The grower has every right to cut the tree down for it is taking up valuable space in the garden and is not giving anything in return. It is almost like the two sides of God, the side of judgment and the side of mercy are in a debate and they both present their arguments. Lucky for us, the side that wins is the side of mercy. We are asked to repent and are told we will be judged but we are also shown mercy.

This mercy is the promise we hear from God over and over and is very clear in the words of the prophet. Seek God while God may be found,

call upon God while God is near;

let the wicked forsake their way,

and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to God, that God may have mercy on them,

and to our God, for God will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

nor are your ways my ways, says the Most High.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.

And if you read a little further, Isaiah tells us you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace. This is something to hold onto as we do the work of repentance. God is calling us today to return. How will you answer?

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