

So this Gospel story of Jesus today is one of those that, when I started reading it, I actually was a little confused myself; what was the point? Jesus tells the story about a tower collapsing, blood in the temple and a fig tree and it doesn't really seem to all flow together. And one of the advantages for me in this preaching role each week is I get to study the text a little deeper and as I did I found out that in this text Jesus is answering maybe one of the greatest questions that all of us ask. So let's find out what He has to say. Just quickly to recap the story because it is a bit odd: People are coming to Jesus and they are referring to an execution that took place among people who are visiting the Holy Temple. People had come on a pilgrimage from a long distance to worship at the temple and the Romans for whatever reasons, we don't know, kill them and actually use their blood on the altar the sort of defame the sanctity of the temple and to send a message. So the crowd comes to Jesus and says "Look what happened to those people the pilgrims they were killed by Rome. Were they bad people? Why were they punished so brutally? What did they do wrong?" That's what they're getting at with Jesus. "Was their sin the reason that they were punished?" And Jesus turns back to them and says "No, but you need to either repent or perish," kind of an odd phrase, something we're not really used to. And then Jesus points out another current event that must have just happened He said "you know that tower that just fell and killed eighteen people that you heard about, do you think they deserved it and that you're better than them that were killed?" And Jesus says "No, you're no better and it's not a punishment but you should repent or perish," and He says it twice to this group asking the question.

And then He tells this story of the fig tree, this parable of the fig tree and what I take as interesting in the story is that that's the question that we would ask today. If you've ever asked yourself "Why did that bad thing happen to me? Was I being punished? Did I do something wrong?" If you've ever asked "Why did that awful thing happen to those people? What did they do wrong?" It's a question we have with us today. "Why is there evil? Why do bad things happen to good people? Human beings, it's our nature to try to make sense of what we can't control and we put narratives or stories on to everything that happens in our lives. The Narratives give us, often an illusion that we're in control, that we understand it. And the narratives are very combative. Here in Washington, when I'm dealing with public policy issues, very often you'll see Narratives that explain very complex thing that people really dig in on a narrative because they like the control and the posturing it gives them. A quick example: if tomorrow we had a horrific massacre at the school somewhere I can almost tell you, without knowing the players, that a meme or a story would emerge. That killing took place because we have too many guns, the NRA is too powerful, we've got to go after guns and within seconds, another meme would come up "What a decrepit world we live in it's so immoral people would use guns or swords or anything but what a terrible fallen world we're in. And these two stories would be two groups explaining.

A few weeks ago, in February, we had a big snowstorm here in Washington and within minutes I noticed in my Facebook feed, the memes were at war. My friends who think that climate change is the greatest danger facing the world right now said "look at this; this snowstorm has never happened like this before, very erratic

behavior in the weather wow this is just another example that climate change is dangerous and we're going to suffer if we don't deal with it." But just as quickly, another story came out explaining the same thing and said "you call it global warming, 30 feet of snow, ha ha your theory is wrong, the big snowstorm proves it. We're always looking to try to explain what's going on and we really like comfortable stories and generally those stories put us in the position of being right and it's sort of what is happening today in the story with Jesus; they're saying "look at those people, they had thus bad thing happen to them, aren't we better? Aren't they worse?" Now this concept has been perpetrated very much by religion. Religion has perpetrated a lot of these stories and I remember as a kid in college I was a Campground Minister, if you can believe it, and I would knock on people's camp doors to invite them to church on Sunday, something you can only do when you're, you know nineteen. And the last thing they wanted to see was a kid coming to invite them to church when they're at the Pocono Mountains for a retreat. And I'd say "please come to church," and they said "no, we're not going to come to church, but come in, [00:05:45] let me tell you why we're not going to go to church and everybody had a pretty horrible story about how the church had done something to them. "My wife was dying, the priest wouldn't come to the hospital because she wasn't of the faith or this person wasn't baptized or some story where religion reinforced to them that they were bad because of something they had done and they were being punished through illness, through early death, some story and they were really horrific stories that I kept hearing, it was a real education and even in our modern culture, even in recent times, you may remember that when Haiti had an earthquake, Pat Robertson who runs the Seven Hundred Club who raised

millions of followers on television said "Haiti created a pact with the devil and that pact with the devil is the reason why they're having an earthquake and they're suffering. You may remember also he said the same thing about Katrina and then also when Disney World had Gay Disney they had a hurricane right after and he said "you see what happens? God is punishing you." So religions have shared that and not just traditional religions even New Age religions. There's the book 'The Secret,' that you're probably all familiar with, it's a number one best seller [00:07:07] new age and it talks about the law of attraction your energy attracts what you have in your life. If you're poor you've attractive that energy; if you're ill you've attracted that energy but you can attract different energy.

Now interestingly, the people who lead this group actually look at their ancestry spiritually to Swedenborgism but it's very different than the theology that we believe because it literally says your beliefs affect your health and to the point where you bring on horrible things in your life for your own Law of Attraction. So another Tower story right 9/11 the Tower comes down and one of the leaders of this group is asked "the people in the tower, did they attract that energy; and is that why they died?" And the leader said "Yes; they attracted that energy they brought that on and it's not a bad thing but here's the reasons why." So it's this belief that punishment from God comes from our behavior and we're punished is with us to this day in many, many faiths.

Now what's interesting in the story with Jesus is that's not Jesus said, He says "no and don't think you're better than anyone else, random acts are going to happen,

things are going to happen, bad things happen to good people. Don't ever think that because they happen to them that you're somehow better or if bad things happen to you, don't think you're worse." But He flips it on the listener and basically says "but there is a cause and effect that you can control; there is a narrative that you can be responsible for and that narrative is your own salvation." And that's a loaded word today, we're not really used to it but what he means when he says repent or perish, pretty dire words from our loving Jesus, basically He's saying "transform yourself, grow, evolve spiritually or your spirit will die." And He's saying "that you do control." And how do you control that; through the thousands of actions every day every decision. Are you more loving or more on the hate side? Are you doing more with compassion or more on selfishness? Are you doing more to help the least of these or are you more doing your best to get away from the least of these? Thousands of decisions every day over a whole lifetime and Jesus says "you are responsible for that path and you do have control over it." Much of Christianity actually looks at death as a moment where you transition into another world and a judge, God on a throne, condemns people right and left. It's the teachings in our church that are very different and basically says "God condemns no one to hell but that we choose it. We choose it with a thousand actions in our life and we're eventually gravitating to a spiritual community that is most like us. If our deepest love is compassion and caring for others, we'll be forever with that group; if not, we will choose a hellish community.

Swedenborg is a mystic and one of his shocking stories was when he said "I went to heaven, I went to hell; I was really surprised in hell there were a lot of Christian

leaders and I was really surprised that Africans had the greatest spirituality and I saw other faiths in heaven. It is no wonder that he was tried for heresy and his books were burned and he barely avoided prison and had to live in England at the end of his life because he basically said "it is not what you say, it is not getting the right doctrine, it is not saying the right creed; it's what you do. Your life is the accumulation of your actions: do you love others or do you not? It sounds simple but it's a life's work and we're gravitating in one direction or the other but God does not punish, so what's the fig tree; there's a fig tree in the story. The fig tree is we stay to ourselves "well this loving God we have forever to get our act together; God will always eternally forgive us there's not going to be any downside to that. It's a little frightening in a way, the fig tree story is saying "God is fighting for you to give you that chance but if you're not bearing fruit eventually you perish through your own sin, not through punishment. But there isn't forever to get your act together. Many times in my coaching practice clients say to me "look I'm going to make a lot of money now, I'm going to retire and in my retirement I will be philanthropic. I'm going to be successful in my political career now, I'm going to do whatever it takes to be powerful and in my retirement I'm going to make it all right but you've got to give me now to do what I need to do and I've got to behave however I have to behave to accumulate that success and then I can deal with it later. The gospel story would say "unlikely; you're really building a path your whole life, a trajectory, that's very hard to change. In this life it can certainly happen but we're pretty much building a path and we don't have forever.

There is a time when we will eventually pass into the next world into those communities that we're most aligned to. So in every action we're making a decision and this life is very important. So in this little story it's confusing at first but when we go deeper there's some very powerful teachings; that God is love, God never punishes, there will be random acts of evil that take place in the world, God can work with us through them, we do have the free will to transform and grow spiritually, our daily choices have eternal consequences, repent or perish, transform or die, in loving others we love God and we don't have forever to get this right. So in closing let us love more, let us forgive more, let us grow more, let us transform more to live a life that is of loving of the neighbor and that is a path to heaven. Amen.