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-- Fr. Rich M. was a great guy and also a brilliant theologian. I met him at Catholic U. when I was a graduate student in the 1980's. After he received his doctorate he taught at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Cincinnati.

-- He was in good shape. He ran regularly (though not like I was doing). He ate healthy, probably healthier than I did. But in 2000, he collapsed and died of a heart attack while jogging near the seminary. He was 50 years old.

-- In his case, the only possible explanation was that there was a history of heart disease in his family. Life is precarious.

-- Jesus knew that. He told these two stories about people who died suddenly. One incident was due to a leader's anger and the other was an accident. People were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. We know how both of these things take place even today.

-- You might think Jesus was using this as a "scare tactic." I remember scare tactic stories, like the one about a young man who has a moment of weakness with his girlfriend and, coming home, is killed in an accident.

-- I don't think Jesus was using that type of tactic. But he was reminding us about some facts of life and death. And he was trying to stress the importance of doing what is right at this particular moment.

-- We can't change the past and the future is uncertain—we have to focus on the present. If there's something wrong in our current behavior, we must work on it now—not sometime in the vague future. For the opportunity may not present itself to us again.

-- After telling about these incidents, he gives us a parable about a fig tree. It fails to bear fruit after three years: actually it is six years, since it takes that long for the tree to give acceptable fruit.

-- God is not the owner of the orchard who wants to tear it out. Rather, he's the gardener, who wants to give it extravagant care for another year. He exercises mercy; he gives it another chance.

-- It's a beautiful image of God for this Year of Mercy we are currently in. But, how do we put these two things together: a warning about an uncertain future, and a parable about God's extravagant mercy.

-- For one thing, this shows us that "life ain't simple." God doesn't simply send bad events to punish the wicked. Sometimes good people suffer even when they don't deserve it.

-- It also demonstrates the importance of mercy. God isn't waiting to catch us doing something bad, and then zap us. If that were so, we'd all be doomed. God wants to give us another chance to change our bad ways.

-- But it also shows us that mercy and justice are delicately balanced. God is not a Santa Claus who gives us gifts and simply ignores the fact that we often abuse those gifts.

-- Which brings us to the final point: there is the ultimate reality of judgment. We will be called to task in the end. Properly speaking, we will judge ourselves when our life is clearly revealed. We can't think that we can enter the final judgment as hateful people and suddenly have a conversion of heart.

-- What does that mean for us today, here and now? I'm reminded of a story told by Carol K. at our mission this past week about her sister who had incurable cancer. She wanted the doctor to cure her.

-- The doctor answered by telling her that, if she dipped her finger in the ocean, the water clinging to her finger would be like the span of her lifetime, while the ocean would be like eternity.

-- He told her this was her opportunity to get right with God. That call to repentance is always there for each of us. I pray that we do not have to have terminal cancer to begin getting our relationship with God right.