

Sermon for Lent III Year C 2019  
*The Why Questions on Tyrants and Towers*

Recently I read about the Buddhist concept of *Mu* which means un-asking.

For instance, if someone asks a question that is too small, too flat, too confining, you answer with this word—*Mu*—which means, “Un-ask the question, because there’s a better question to be asked.”

There is a wiser question, a deeper question, a truer question. A question that expands possibility and resists fear.

If I could sum up this week’s Gospel reading in a single word, perhaps adopting the Buddhist principle of *mu* could do it.

The evangelist, Luke, describes the scene—

Jesus is in his hometown and some people come to Jesus with headline news of horror and tragedy involving a tyrant.

The tyrant, Pontius Pilate, has slaughtered a group of Galilean Jews and mingled their blood with the blood of sacrificial lambs.

Jesus himself in his response to them reminds them of the eighteen souls killed in the collapse of the tower of Siloam.

What is the question being asked here?

One the one hand, the implied question could be one that has plagued the human race throughout time and place—Why?

Why did these terrible things happen?

Why is there so much pain in the world?

Why does a good God allow human suffering and let tyrants get away with the terrible things they do?

Why do towers fall?

On the other hand, these townspeople

could be asking Jesus, “Why aren’t you as full of self-righteous anger over that tyrant Pilate as we are?”

They could be trying to draw Jesus into taking a good bite of some self-righteous anger.

If self-righteous anger were cuisine, then it would be the pièce de résistance of any meal.

Self-righteous anger is a dish we love to linger over and return to, time and time again.

Anger by itself does not taste so good, it often leaves a bitter aftertaste.

But self-righteous anger—

well that's a seasoning

that makes plain-old-hamburger anger irresistible.

It goes down smoothly and makes us feel superior.

It makes us feel that we are on a higher moral plain than others, especially our enemies.

We're not the "bad guys," they are.

Come on, Jesus, why aren't you full of self-righteous anger like we are?

Aren't you on our side, the side of the angels?

This encounter Jesus has with his neighbors from his hometown, I believe they were filled with self-righteous anger as they implied the age-old question of why a good God lets bad things happen.

But Jesus' response is essentially *Mu*.

Ask a better question.

For thousands of years, questions of theodicy (why is there evil in the world) have plagued people—

Christians along with Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, even philosophers—and we have all failed to find answers that satisfy us.

Yet we can't seem to stop asking the questions.

We still crave a "theory of everything"

especially when bad stuff happens.

We still look for formulas to eradicate the mystery.

Everything in us still longs to make sense of the senseless.

Perhaps that's why we so often resort to a big old slice of self-righteous pie so we can blame the ills of the world on others.

As Luke's gospel makes clear, the people who ask Jesus their versions of the "why" question already have an answer in mind.

They don't approach Jesus as a blank slate.

They show up hoping for him to confirm what they already believe.

That is, they come expecting Jesus to verify their deeply held assumption that people suffer because they're sinful.

They get what they deserve.

Bad things happen to bad people.

Bad things happen because of bad people.

It's tempting for us as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to look at such beliefs and feel smugly superior in comparison.

But how different, really, are the beliefs *we* hold about human suffering?

We live in a world that is not so unlike the atrocity-rumoring Galileans—when everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of the world.

Frankly we have TV and radio and podcasts and newspapers dedicated to keep what is called "the rage machine" going—

Democrats blame Republicans, Republicans blame Democrats,

Christians blame Muslims, Muslims blame Christians.

Fundamentalist Christians blame liberal Christians and vice versa.

The cycle of self-righteous anger rolls on

even as the path our anger is riding on is the age-old question of why is there so much pain in the world?

When the unspeakable happens, there are default settings we revert to.

Perhaps we say, nothing happens outside God's perfect plan.

God is testing and refining your character through this tragedy.

This is the refiner's fire.

The Lord never gives anyone more than they can bear.

Buck up—other people have had it worse.

We've all heard and thought these or many others like them.

The problem with these answers is

that they hold us apart from those who suffer.

They inoculate us from the searing work  
of solidarity, empathy, and compassion.  
They keep us from embracing our common lot,  
our common brokenness, our common sinfulness,  
our common humanity.

When Jesus challenges his listener's assumptions  
and tells them to repent before it's too late,  
I think part of what he's saying is—

Any question that allows us to keep a sanitized distance  
from the mystery and reality of another person's pain  
is a question we need to un-ask.

*Mu*, Jesus says.

Any question that seeks to galvanize and justify  
our heated moral superiority over others  
is a question we need to un-ask.

*Mu*, Jesus says.

In the face of the news of the tyrant Pilate and the collapse of the tower,  
when we wax eloquently about “them” and “us,”  
or their sinfulness and our piety,  
their conservative backwardness and our progressive sophistication,  
Jesus says, *Mu*.

You're asking the wrong questions.

You're mired in irrelevance.

You're losing your life in your effort to save it and justify yourself.

Start over again.

Ask a better question.

God deep.

Be brave.

But, okay, what is the better question?

If asking “why” won't get us anywhere, what kind of question will?

In typical fashion, Jesus addresses the problem with a story, a parable.  
A landowner had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, he tells his listeners.

One day, the landowner went looking for fruit on the tree,  
and found none.

Incensed, he confronted his gardener:

“For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree,  
and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it waste the soil?”

But the gardener begged his employer for more time:

“Sir, let the tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put  
manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good;  
but if not, you can cut it down.”

What an odd story to tell at such a moment!

What on earth does a fruitless fig tree have to do  
with a tyrant like Pilate and his heinous killing spree,  
or the massive engineering failure that toppled the tower of Siloam?  
What is Jesus trying to say?

To begin with, Jesus does not focus on the tyrant or the tower,  
and he doesn't say that the things

that happened are anything other than bad,  
but he will not partake in self-righteous anger.

So, he turns things back on them and says,  
in essence, that when it comes to judging sin,  
it is best to look for the log in your own eye  
before searching for the speck in your neighbor's  
or even your enemy's.

And then by telling the parable, he tells them to engage in story  
rather than platitudes.

Platitudes are flat and shallow.

Formulas are simplistic, they reduce and pervert complexity.

And theories don't heal.

Any questions that call for shallow answers  
aren't worth asking in the face of tragedy.

But stories open up possibility.

Stories include, unmake, and transform us.

*Why did the tower fall? Why does the tyrant get his way?  
Why aren't you as filled with self-righteous anger as we are?*  
Okay, Jesus says, let me tell you a story about a fig tree.

The parable he tells invites questions in several directions at once.  
I can't possibly exhaust them all—none of us can.

But here are a few to get us started:

In what ways am I akin to the absentee landowner,  
standing apart from where life and death actually happen?

How am I refusing to get my hands dirty?

Wallowing, instead, in futility and despair?

Pronouncing judgments that I have no right to pronounce?

Am I prone to look for waste, loss, and scarcity in the world—  
or for potential and possibility?

Where in my life—or in the lives of others—  
have I prematurely called it quits, essentially saying,  
“There's no life worth cultivating here. Cut it down!”

In what ways am I like the fig tree?

Un-enlivened?

Un-nourished?

Unable or unwilling to nourish others?

In what ways do I feel helpless or hopeless?

Ignored or dismissed?

What kinds of tending would it take to bring me back to life?

Am I willing to receive such intimate, consequential care?

Will I consent to change?

Might I dare to flourish in a world  
where I have been undervalued or invisible?

In what ways am I like the gardener?

Where in my life am I willing to accept Jesus' invitation  
to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure of life?

Where do I see life where others see death?

How willing am I to pour hope into a project I can't control  
or know for sure what the result will be?  
Am I brave enough to sacrifice time, effort, love,  
and hope into this tree—this relationship,  
this cause, this tragedy, this injustice—  
with no guarantee of a fruitful outcome?  
Can I be the prophet of a future not my own?

I confess.

I'm rather a pro at asking the why question  
and infusing a good lump of self-righteous anger in the asking.  
Why? Is the question I shout in God's face whenever bad stuff happens.  
I ask it often.  
I ask because I want to understand.  
I ask because I'm afraid.  
I ask because mystery and complexity are just so hard and messy.

And yet, every time I ask why—  
either with or without the self-righteousness—  
Jesus says, *Mu*.  
He says it because "why" is just not a life-giving question.  
Why hasn't the fig tree produced fruit yet?  
Um, here's the manure and here's a spade—get to work!  
Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world?  
Um, go weep with someone who's weeping.  
Go fight for the justice you long to see.  
Go confront evil where it needs confronting.  
Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending.  
Go cultivate beautiful, life-giving things.  
Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.

Go imagine a deeper, more complex story.  
Ask a better question and live a better answer.  
Do it now. Why?  
Because there is no “us” and “them.”  
Because there are no guarantees.  
Because all of us are beloved,  
all of us are perishing,  
and all of us need the care of a hopeful, patient gardener.  
Ask a better question.  
Do it now.  
Now is the time for forgiveness, mercy, love and second chances.