

WEEKLY REFLECTION

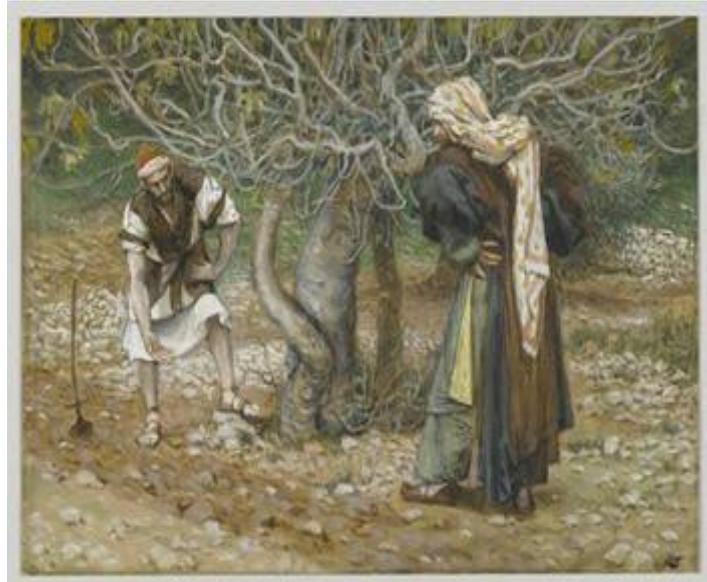
Lent 3C, 2022

Luke 13: 1-9

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What Are You Asking?

How many times over the past two years have you asked — or heard someone else ask — “Why?” Why is the Covid pandemic lasting so long? Why are so many people dying? Why can’t we make progress when it comes to climate change? Why are thousands of young people in our country depressed and anxious? Why do tyrants in our world go unchecked? Why are nations embroiled in war?



I suppose to ask “why” is to be human. We can’t help ourselves; we want to understand. We want to make sense of the world. We want our lives to be logical, reasonable, orderly, sane.

So it’s worth pausing over the fact that Jesus spends very little of his time on earth addressing this fundamental human question. In fact, he actively discourages his followers from asking it.

In a beautiful book of narrative theology, *In the Shelter: Finding Welcome in the Here and Now*, poet and healer Pádraig Ó Tuama describes the Buddhist concept of “mu,” or un-asking. If someone asks a question that’s too small, flat, or confining, Ó Tuama writes, you can answer with this word mu, which means, “Un-ask the question, because there’s a better question to be asked.” 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, I would adopt Ó Tuama’s. Mu. I would even argue that “mu” is a concept near and dear to Jesus’s heart. We’re the ones who want to pin Jesus down for answers. He’s actually more interested in helping us ask better questions.

As St. Luke describes the scene, some folks come to Jesus with headline news of horror and tragedy. Pontius Pilate has slaughtered a group of Galilean Jews, and mingled their blood with the blood of sacrificial lambs. Meanwhile, the tower of Siloam has collapsed, crushing and killing eighteen people. The reporters accompany these brutal accounts with the question we know so well: Why? Why did these terrible things happen? Why is there so much pain in the world? Why does a good God allow human suffering?

Jesus’s response? Mu. Ask a better question.

For two thousand years, questions of theodicy have plagued Christianity, and for two thousand years, we Christians have failed to find answers that satisfy us. Yet we can’t stop asking the questions. We still crave a Theory of Everything when bad stuff happens. We still look for formulas to eradicate mystery, and make sense of the senseless.

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 with a blank slate; they come expecting Jesus to verify their deeply held belief that people suffer because they're sinful. That folks get what they deserve. That bad things happen to bad people. It's tempting for us to look at such "ancient" beliefs and feel smugly superior in comparison. But how different, really, are the beliefs we hold about human suffering? When the unspeakable happens, what default settings do we revert to? "Nothing happens outside of God's plan." "God is growing your character through this tragedy." "Don't worry, the Lord never gives anyone more than they can bear." "Nothing is ever lost." "Buck up — other people have it worse."

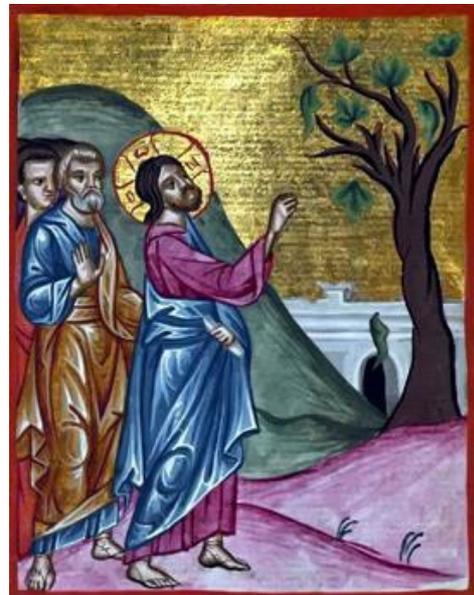
The problem with every one of these answers is that they hold us apart from those who suffer. They keep us from embracing our common lot, our common brokenness, our common humanity. When Jesus challenges his listeners' assumptions and tells them to "repent" before it's too late, I think part of what he's saying is this: 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 to the folks who bring him the painful news about Pilate and Siloam. "Mu," he says to us when we batter God with "why" instead of offering God our hands and feet, our hearts and souls. "Mu," he insists when we wax eloquent about other people's suffering, but do nothing to alleviate it. Mu. You're asking the wrong questions. You're mired in irrelevance. You're losing your life in your effort to save it. Start over again. Ask a better question. Go deeper, be braver, draw closer. Repent. Which means, change your mind. Turn around. Head in a different direction.

Okay. But 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 landowner has a fig tree planted in his vineyard, Jesus tells his listeners. One day, the landowner goes looking for fruit on the tree, and finds none. Incensed, he confronts his gardener: "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree," he says, "and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it waste the soil?" But the gardener begs 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 moment!

What on earth does a fruitless fig tree have to do with Pilate's heinous killing spree, or with the massive technological failure that toppled the tower of Siloam? What is Jesus saying? Well, for starters, he's saying, "Engage in story rather than platitude." Platitudes are flat. Formulas are reductive. Theories don't heal. And questions that call for shallow answers aren't worth asking in the face of tragedy. But stories? Stories open up possibility. Stories include, unmake, and transform us.



Why did those Galilean Jews die? Why did the tower fall? Okay, sit down, let me tell you about a fig tree...

The parable Jesus tells invites questions in several directions at once. I can't possibly exhaust them — none of us can — but here are a few to get us started:

In what ways am I like the absentee landowner, standing apart from where life and death actually happen? How am I refusing to get my hands dirty? Wallowing in futility and despair? Pronouncing judgments 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, saying, "There's no life here worth cultivating. 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 thus far been invisible? Have I become complacent when it comes to repentance and amendment of life, assuming that I have limitless time to become fruitful? Have I forgotten that the same patient God who gives me another year to thrive will also someday call me to account?

In what ways am I like the gardener? Where in my life am I willing to accept Jesus's invitation to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure? Where do I see life where others see death? How willing am I to pour hope into a project I can't control? 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, in the words of Bishop Ken Untener, be the prophet of a future not my own?

I won't lie: I'm a pro at asking the why question. "Why" is the question I stick in God's face whenever bad stuff happens; I ask it more often than all other questions combined. I ask because I want to understand. I ask because I'm afraid. I ask because mystery unnerves me.

And yet, every time I ask why, Jesus says "mu." He says "mu" because "why" is just plain 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 things. Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.

In short: imagine a deeper story. Ask a better question. Live a better answer. Time is running short. The season to bear fruit has come. Repent. Do it now.