

## **Homily – You Ask the Wrong Questions**

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Today I want to re-introduce you to a Buddhist concept called “mu”. Mu is very much in line with the wisdom of Jesus, but the Buddhists actually have a word for this concept. The word is just two short letters – “m” and “u” – “mu”. We don’t have this word in English, but the closest meaning would be un-asking. If someone asks a question that is too small, too flat, too confining, then you can answer with this word mu, which means, “Un-ask the question, because there’s a better question to be asked. When you say “mu” to a person you indicate that there is a wiser question, a deeper question, a truer question. There is a question that expands possibility, and resists fear. And, if I could sum up this week’s Gospel reading in a single word, I would adopt the Buddhist word “mu.”

Today’s passage is made up of a two-part current event, the Galileans killed by Pilate, and those killed at the tower of Siloam, followed by an instructive parable, the one-year reprieve of the unproductive fig tree. Now today, in the twenty-first century, we don’t know much about the two events Jesus shares at the beginning of the passage. We know that Galilee had a lot of Zealot insurgents who sometimes had violent uprisings against the Roman occupation. It seems likely that during one of the festivals a major disturbance occurred in Jerusalem, and it was ruthlessly put down by Pilate, the Roman governor. The religious elites were some of those in the crowd who were listening to Jesus share today’s passage. These religious elites hated Rome, but they also hated the violence of the Zealots. The religious elites of two thousand years ago would have felt that Pilate’s killing of the Galilean Zealots was just. Furthermore, they would have believed the killings were a demonstration of the wrath of God against those who do bad things.

And, two thousand year ago, Jesus knows what the religious elites were thinking and he voiced the question that was on their mind. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” And, Jesus points out that this question that he

voiced was the wrong question for the religious elites to be thinking, and he basically says, “un-ask the question. The question is not “why did this tragedy happen?” This question is too flat, too confining, and should be answered with that Buddhist work “mu.” Jesus disagrees with the premise of the religious elites, a premise based on a spiritual tradition that has gone askew.

To illustrate this Jesus shares a second story that seems to be another current event of the day. Now, today we have no record of the tower of Siloam. However, scholars guess that it was associated with the building of an aqueduct in Jerusalem under the orders of Pilate and financed by the confiscation of the sacred Temple tax. The religious elites would have resented the misappropriation of Temple funds and would have viewed the workers on this project as stained by sin and worthy recipients of divine judgment.

Once again Jesus disagrees with this premise of the religious elites, and again he voices the question that they were thinking. “Those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Essentially Jesus responds with another “mu”. There is a wiser question, a deeper question, a truer question, than your mistaken belief that God likes some more than others.

After the first story, Jesus says “mu” and points out that the unbounded love of God is the same for the Zealots and for the religious elites. God loves both. And, the same happens after the second story. Jesus points out that the unbounded love of God is the same for the workers killed by the falling tower and for the religious elites. Again, God loves both. “Mu”.

In both instances Jesus is pointing out an idolatry that we still have today. We still believe that God is against our enemies and God is for us. We still believe that tragedy is evidence of God’s displeasure. If something bad happens to a person then they must have done something to deserve it. And, conversely, if something good happens to a person then God must love them more. In today’s passage Jesus is telling the religious elites, and

by extension telling us today, that we must repent of this incorrect idolatry. We must turn back to a spirituality that leads us into healthy relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. We must turn back from a false path that thinks God loves us more than the other.

In the last part of today's Gospel passage we hear a parable about the unproductive fig tree. In the parallel stories told by Matthew and Mark, the landowner has the gardener cut down the tree. Enough is enough. However, in Luke's telling of this same parable, the gardener begs a one-year reprieve. What an odd story to tell at such a moment! What on earth does a fruitless fig tree have to do with Pilate's killing spree, or with the massive failure that toppled the tower of Siloam? What is Jesus saying? Well, for starters, he's saying, "Engage in story rather than in 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 unmake, and transform us. Why did those Galilean Jews die? Why did the tower fall? "Mu," instead, let me tell you about a fig tree...

The parable Jesus tells invites many, deep, meaningful questions. And like many parables we can frame our questions from several vantage points. 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?

How am I 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."

And, then we can turn the parable to ask, 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?

And, again we can turn the parable to look at 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?

Now, I am guessing that many of you are like me. I am really good at asking the "why" questions. God, why are you letting Russia invade Ukraine? God, why did my grandson get Covid? God, why do we seem to have forgotten how to get along? "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 if I know "why" then I might be able to control. And yet, every time I ask why, Jesus says "mu." He says it because "why" is just plain and it is not a life-giving question. Why hasn't the fig tree produced fruit yet? Mu, here's the manure, and here's a spade — get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world? Mu, 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.

So, today, I share "mu" with you. Ask a better question. 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 the beloved of God, all of us are perishing, and all of us need the care of a hopeful, patient gardener. Ask a better question. Do it now. "Mu."