

**Sermon for Sunday, March 20, 2022**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**“Ask Better Questions, Get Your Hands Dirty”**  
**Rev. Amy Zalk Larson**  
**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa**

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

One of my favorite authors is the Irish poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama. He was the leader of the Corrymeela Community, a peace and reconciliation organization in Northern Ireland. These days he's part of the On Being Project and he offers the beautiful *Poetry Unbound* podcast. I love hearing him read and reflect upon poems, mostly because he's so wise, but also because he has this gorgeous Irish accent. I would be moved if he read the tax code.

One thing I've learned from Ó Tuama is the Buddhist concept of “mu” or un-asking.<sup>1</sup> If someone asks a question that's too small, flat, or confining, Ó Tuama teaches you can answer with this word “mu”. Mu 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. Ó Tuama's teaching, as well as a reflection by author Debie Thomas,<sup>2</sup> have given me a new perspective on our gospel reading today. I think Jesus is saying “mu”, ask a better question.

People come to Jesus asking **why**. Why were those Galileans slaughtered by Pilate? They were making sacrifices to God! How could that happen? Why did that tower collapse, crushing eighteen people? Why did these terrible things take place?

“Why” is a question we've been asking a lot over the past two years, and over the past three weeks as Ukraine suffers. But, it's a question that's always close to the surface:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Why is there so much pain in the world?

Why does a good God allow suffering?

It's so human to want answers to these questions. For centuries, people have been searching for a Theory of Everything to make sense of why bad stuff happens. We often hope that faith, that Jesus will provide us with explanations. Yet Jesus rarely gives answers. Instead, he invites us to ask better questions.

In our reading today, the people who ask Jesus **why**, have a theory in mind. They're pretty sure that those people died because they were sinners, people get what they deserve, bad things happen to bad people. We may use different language, but we, too, have all sorts of theories, all manner of

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<sup>1</sup> Pádraig Ó Tuama discusses this concept in an interview with Krista Tippet on the *On Being* Podcast entitled: “Belonging Creates and Undoes Us”

<https://onbeing.org/programs/padraig-o-tuama-belonging-creates-and-undoes-us/>

<sup>2</sup> “What Are You Asking” by Debie Thomas. Lectionary column posted on [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net)

platitudes: They must have bad karma, everything happens for a reason, what goes around comes around, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, this is all part of God's plan. The problem is, every answer we offer holds us apart from people who are suffering. We theorize and analyze, debate and pontificate, and get to stay at a safe distance from actual pain. Trying to explain it all can keep us from acknowledging that we are all broken, we all suffer, and, as Kate Bowler says, there is no cure for being human.

I think that's why Jesus calls his first listeners, and us, to repent before it's too late. I think, in part, he's saying un-ask any question that keeps you at a sanitized distance from the pain of the world. Debie Thomas has helped me to imagine how Jesus responds to our questions with the word "Mu". She writes, "'Mu,' Jesus 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."

Then, to help us to repent and ask better questions, Jesus tells a story. This is what Jesus so often does in response to our questions. Rather than giving easy answers, he offers images that open possibilities that have the potential to transform us. Consider again the story he tells, and notice the questions emerge for you. A landlord has planted a fig tree in a vineyard. One day, he goes out looking for fruit on the tree. When he finds none, he becomes enraged. "It's wasting the soil. Cut it down." But the gardener pleads for more time. "Let the tree alone. I'll dig around in it and put manure on it. Give it time."

This week, I've been wondering, how am I like the landowner? How often do I look at people and situations and pronounce judgments - "There's nothing worth saving here, no life worth tending, cut it down!" How often do I stand apart refusing to get my hands dirty, unwilling to do what is needed to nurture life? When I look at the world do I see waste and loss and scarcity, or do I see possibility?

I wonder, how am I like the fig tree? In what ways am I unable or unwilling to offer nourishment? Where do I feel helpless or hopeless, invisible, dismissed? What would it take to bring me to new life? What kind of tending do I need? Am I willing to receive that? How am I complacent, assuming I have plenty of time to repent and become fruitful?

How am I like the gardener? Where am I willing to get into the mud and muck to tend life? Am I willing to pour hope into a project I can't control? Will I give time, effort, love, and hope for this tree — this relationship, this cause, this tragedy, this injustice — with no guarantee of a fruitful outcome?

As I reflect on these questions, I'm also pondering Debie Thomas's words. "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."

We can do this, beloved of God, because we have a gardener who has committed to tending us always and forever. God will not give up on us. From the beginning in that first garden, God has been in the muck and mud with us, forming us, and breathing life into us. God has not remained at a safe distance from our brokenness and pain. God has come in Jesus to enter all the manure of this life.

Now from our places of pain and fruitlessness, Jesus brings new life. Jesus pours the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we might know and bear the fruit of the Spirit. With such tender love, we can repent, we can ask better questions, we can tend others, we can receive care, we can bear fruit.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.