

Mark 4:26-34

Trees

The stars in the sky have long occupied people who, after long hours, working, have found it both relaxing and interesting, not to mention entertaining, to follow their movements and see patterns in their configuration.

In a way, one is connected to the people of the past because we share with them the same sky and have seen Orion's Belt and the Big and Little Dippers. There is even a mall nearby named after one of these stars, Polaris, the North Star.

Trees

One of the more universal sights that, like the stars, are commonly shared, are trees in all their array of shapes and sizes. Except for the high mountains and deserts, trees are everywhere, and they serve as popular examples and similes and aphorisms and metaphors:

The apple does not fall far from the tree

He went "out on a limb"

Our family connections are a "family tree"

Though trees are rooted in the earth, they seem to touch the sky, and in the Bible one reads about

The Cedars of Lebanon and

The Tree of Life

One reason the trees serve as such good illustrations of life is that they are themselves alive, not only with their own lives, but that of other things for which they serve as habitats.

On my walks this time of the year I hear the life of the birds in the trees, many different species and kinds. There seems an urgency to the noise from the trees that I attribute to the presence of the newly hatched young.

It does not seem like I am being serenaded as I pass by, but screamed at, cautioned not to come too close, sometimes it even seems like individual birds are following me, ensuring that I do not turn to threaten them. It is no wonder that religious thinkers like Ezekiel and Jesus have used trees as illustrations for the spiritual life.

Ezekiel and Mark

Though I have been aware of the parable of the Mustard Seed all my life, only this week have I learned that the prophet Ezekiel made use of the similar observation, only it was about the Cedars instead:

"This is what the Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a Cedar and plant it, I will break off a tender sprig from its top most shoots and I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a

splendid Cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches.”

The same kind statement is on the lips of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel; “What shall we say the Kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.”

The illustration here is not merely one of size. The seed does not become a bigger seed. Like any plant, or like the caterpillar and the butterfly, the seed not only turns into something bigger, but something different in kind altogether.

Life is like this. The spiritual life is like this. In the parable Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like this. And while I am not willing to say that a parable about the kingdom is meant to be understood as a parable about earthly life, there is a connection.

“Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” is the way Jesus puts the question in the Sermon on the Mount. He even uses the birds themselves as an illustration of how God takes care of us, even though they are much less valuable than we are, God takes care of them. Surely, whenever we see this dynamic played out in our lives,

it is emblematic of what is eternal. While sometimes this encouragement is most needed, we are meant to point it to things eternal.

The scientists tell us that all life proceeded forth from a single cell organism. They might be wrong, many Christians believe that the implications of the creation account in Genesis are that life began with fully developed complex organisms. I am not criticizing that view, only suggesting that the prevalent scientific understanding intensifies this parable’s meaning.

One microscopic cell, infinitely smaller than a mustard seed, has turned in to all this, not just the trees, but everything else too, the whole vast array of Discovery Channel topics, living things. Amazing really!

### Anxiety and Hardship

What is the gospel meaning for us today of this simple parable that something so small and as plain as a seed, can turn into something so large and complex and beautiful? Let me suggest first that it is meant to challenge our notions about life. I suppose if we expect that our notions about life are not to be challenged, one might ask why we come to church. I guess we might come to have them confirmed, no matter how unrealistic that expectation may be.

This parable tells us that life is more than what we think it is; that God’s grace is bigger and more affective

than we know, and that we live out every moment in the care and protection of God.

Jesus came proclaiming, “The time has come, the Kingdom of God is near, repent and believe in the Gospel.” At the very least this is meant to ease our sense of anxiety about our lives. Anxiety is a thief that robs life of its meaning and joy, and causes us to be suspicious of others, whose presence we may perceive to be threatening. The Kingdom is bigger than we know. There is room for everyone. Have peace.

Beyond that, we are meant to see the metaphor in the other direction. Not only does a small seed turn into a large tree with birds in its branches, but the world itself, in all its magnificent wonder, is a seed about to blast open into a whole new unimaginable life. Your life is a seed, rather small, about to become something bigger and of another kind.

Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come.” Think of that. We are meant not to be discouraged, but encouraged. Not one of our problems gets the final word because they are swallowed up by new life. Things are not always what they seem.

One is tempted to think of the story of Samuel when he went to the house of Jesse to anoint for Israel a new king. Jesse paraded before him 7 sons and each time he thought, “this must be the one,” but the spirit said,

“no.” Things are not what they seem. Finally the 8th son, the youngest, was brought in from tending sheep, and Samuel did not hesitate to anoint him, David, Israel’s great king.

Take heart, everything that happens in life is meant to teach us to have faith, and to have hope for our future, the future of the world, not based on human competence, for which we see too little evidence, but because of God’s grace, which raised up Jesus from the dead.

I’m not saying that everything that happens is God’s will, but that there is nothing that happens that is beyond the power of God’s grace to redeem, which is like a mustard seed which, when planted, turns into the largest of all garden plants with a whole bio-system in its branches.

The most troubling of times have served as the seedbed for great insights as this one, that what is mortal, turns into what is immortal, that what is perishable turns into what is imperishable, and when it does, not even the stars serve as a good illustration, not even the trees.

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