

Mark 4:26-34

Arches

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

June 16, 2024

In the first part of today's reading from The Gospel of Mark we read;

“This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he *does not know how*. All by itself the soil produces grain . . . as soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it . . .”

Nowadays, with the scientific understanding of biology, and botany, people might be inclined to say that they *do* understand *how* it happens, removing some of the mystery.

Nature can be understood at the molecular level better now than in antiquity. If, however, that causes one to think they no longer need to ask questions, or take lessons, that they know all there is to know about where all this comes from, the source of energy behind it, the creative mind, the determined love; then one runs the risk of the mistaken conclusion that because more is known, the mystery is solved.

On the contrary, the premise remains even in the present, that life happens and we have a close-up view of what we do not understand. At this point Jesus adds to the illustration from nature with the brief put powerful Parable of the Mustard Seed.

The Kingdom of God starts out small and ends up big like a seed that turns from something you can hold in your hand into a sprawling garden tree big enough to have an entire ecological system in it, including birds singing in its branches. And it does this all on its own, without human help.

Both of these parables make use of nature to express the miracle of life as; a sheer gift that is freely given, not of our doing; and as a grand gift that staggers the imagination and boggles the mind, is different from and bigger than, more complex and beautiful than, could have been expected.

It would be a shame, don't you think, to fail to understand these parables, whether it comes from thinking we already know or from having a different life experience because we live in the industrial period. In that failure lies the temptation to view life in terms of its brevity instead of its grandness, and its hardships instead of its beauty, and thus miss the extravaganza that it is.

In missing the extravaganza, the joy is lost; and humility and gratitude and faith, that should accompany life, elude and fail us, traded in for boredom at best, and at worst, disdain, bitterness.

There can be a disconnect. We might call that disconnect, “estrangement,” separation from the source of our lives, and from its goodness. Think of estrangement as a theological idea, being separated from God.

One wonders what Jesus would say about kingdom of God in the modern era. It is at least possible that if Jesus were alive today, he would use different illustrations and tell different parables than the ones he told.

He might come up with stories about working in factories, or life in suburban enclaves where most people experience seeds from household plants and flower gardens and the attempts at the perfect lawn, and sunflower seeds at baseball games.

While I was away last week, back in St. Louis with a few hours on my hands, I decided to visit the Arch because I hadn't been there in twenty years or so, and maybe only once in the last forty years. I knew that the grounds had been recently renovated, as well as the elevator on the inside that takes people to the top; the riverfront, the museum underneath, all newly remade. I hadn't been there since the renovation.

I did not go up, the view from the top holds little attraction for me. I have been up several times before and not been terribly impressed; Missouri on one side, Illinois on the other. There is actually now an exhibit one can visit on the ground inside the museum, that gives a view of what one would see. I walked through it and looked at the pictures and was happy.

It was the museum that interested me. In my childhood, the museum was all about westward expansion and the Lewis and Clark expedition. That story was still told, but more briefly. Added to it are

exhibits regarding the history of the city from its founding in 1764 all the way until the time of my childhood after the Arch itself had been built.

In one such exhibit there was a video reconstruction of the city over time, beginning with the landscape before its founding, showing the growth and changes that occurred as the city grew, revealing where the Arch presently stands compared to the layout of the city in its past configurations.

I knew the city had been torn down and rebuilt several times, as have many cities, but I have to admit I had never thought of it in that way, that the city had originally been built on what is now the land of the National Park, tree lined pathways that pass large reflecting pools and on the east side of the park, a grand staircase leading to the riverfront (now that I think of it, it makes sense).

It was well into the 19th century before the city expanded beyond it, and not until the 1940's that the process began of removing that old part of the city that once stood where the Arch stands now. The only thing left is the Catholic church, (The Basilica of Saint Louis, King of France, but we always just call it the Old Cathedral) which sits near the base of the south leg of the Arch. Everything else is new.

Perhaps Jesus would tell a parable about arches or other modern structures, their beauty, their load-bearing strength, their symbolic quality as a passageway to something new, even if some people

*do* understand the engineering, their ability (in this case) to reach for the sky, it is more impressive standing at its base than it is from a distance, people stood and marveled; anything which may provide some illustration of the Kingdom of God.

The same dynamics played itself out in the Roman world of Paul and the early believers in the first century. Much of what for them was the old world was torn down, including the Temple in Jerusalem. And much was built new like the Arch of Titus in Rome, which commemorated the Roman victory in the Jewish War in which the Temple was destroyed.

It was a violent and destructive century, more than usual, not unlike this last century in contemporary times. And like the crops in the fields and the Mustard plants in the gardens in the parables Jesus told, arches can only be a this-worldly illustrations about spiritual things, like how grand is the gift of life, and how it comes gratuitously, even though we don't understand it.

In the epistle for the day from 2 Corinthians, we read where Paul has spoken in more direct terms about these spiritual things;

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.” There has been a renovation in the inner life.

He then goes on to speak of what he calls, “reconciliation,” the theological word for it is,

“atonement.” People have messed it up with theories about which they argue. It is not the theories that are the problem, but the incessant arguing.

He is not talking about an earthy kind of reconciliation or renewal, like the renovation of a museum; but reconciliation with God, in which the aforementioned estrangement has been overcome. In fact, he goes on to say,

“ . . . God was In Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sin against them.”

Reconciliation is a high and magnificent concept, one that is worthy of admiration even if it *does* confound us occasionally. How *does* one speak of it? What parable can one tell? It is strong at the bottom and reaches for the sky like the Arch in my home city, and can bear the weight like all those Roman arches which supported the weight of large buildings.

It is not a human accomplishment, but a divine gift, which applies to life no matter the era or the place one lives, or what stories one tells. It makes us new. It makes everything new. We stand before it and *marvel*.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)