

EVIL THAT DOES NOT SLEEP

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 17, 2016

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Beauty Born of an Irritant

Of all the different kinds of jewelry that exist, perhaps my absolute favorite is pearls. One of the very first things I ever bought for my wife was a gift of pearls.

When I was in San Francisco working on my doctorate, I once had an afternoon off, and the seminary, being about ten miles from downtown San Francisco, I decided to go there and spend the whole magnificent afternoon at shops in Chinatown.

Believe it or not, there were about ten different shops there that sold nothing but pearls, and I spent the whole time looking at pearls. Some of them were pushing a thousand dollars each, and some went as low as fifty cents each, with others selling at prices varying at everything in between.

I enjoyed the beauty of the pearls, their luster and also their symbolism. The notion that something beautiful can be made out of an irritant is intriguing to me. I like that. It's something all of us can use now and then.

There's a parable in Matthew 13:45-46 about pearls:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

That's the end of the parable.

Pearls Symbolize Things of Great Value

When once I inquired about the meaning of pearls, I was taught that the pearl represents the gospel. You know, the good news of God. Since then, over the course of a long ministry, I've come across many different answers to that question. The pearl stands for salvation. The pearl is a symbol for the surpassing love of God, which is of course linked to that gospel. I've seen versions of it in which the pearl represents grace, forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation.

In the Mormon scriptures, there is one whole book that is called “The Pearl of Great Price.” The gist of it is that the book stands for the essence of the Torah, the story of God's interaction with humanity.

While researching this sermon, I reluctantly learned that Pope Pius the second had come out with a definitive statement that, “The pearl represents virginity.” (Obviously there are not many pearls in this congregation.)

Finally, in common usage, the pearl symbolizes anything of surpassing value. If you think about what Jesus said in that short little parable, if you take it literally, you must sell all that you have: your car, your house. You've got a 401k? You've got to divest it. And your retirement fund. Any pots and pans that you have. Your clothes. All that stuff. Can you imagine divesting yourself entirely because you found one thing of surpassing value? Do you get a feeling for what Jesus

was trying to say about ridding yourself of all your worldly goods?

I went over the parable quickly because I didn't want to draw your attention to it prematurely. That vignette says the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of exceedingly great value. Now there are only two definitive things Jesus says about the kingdom of heaven in the scriptures. One is that it's at hand, and the other is that it's within you.

The at-hand part is easy. It's one of those phrases that have come down through the centuries virtually unchanged. What it means is that you're sitting there in your La-Z-Boy watching TV, and your beer is right here on the table beside you while you're watching whatever, and the beer is at hand. You don't even have to get up to get it. It's within reach. And that's what "at hand" has meant for two millennia.

The Pearl Represents Your Identity

But the kingdom of heaven is actually closer than that. It's within you. We've gone over this thought with emphasis many times before in other sermons. The kingdom of heaven isn't just over there; it's within you. It's much more than at hand.

So now, what I want to do is to answer that question one more time. What does the pearl mean? You're not going to be impressed with my answer, but I'm going to stick to it. My answer is this: The pearl represents your identity, who you are. I wasn't impressed either when I thought about it, but let me justify my answer.

Here's my logic behind it. The pearl stands for the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is within you. It is part of you. It is at hand. It is part of your nature. So in the text I read from First Peter, it is part of your

partaking in the divine nature. It is part of the understanding when it says that you are a temple. You are a child of God. You are made in the image and likeness of God.

Two Fundamental Errors by the Church

So going back, the kingdom of heaven symbolizes the pearl, which stands for who you are. You are the embodiment of the truism that the kingdom of heaven is within you.

Now I realize fully and acutely that I am not orthodox any more. I can't get by with saying that in other churches, but here's the reason why: I have come to believe the fundamental mistake that the church has made over the course of two millennia that the two defining events within the Christian story, within the Christian faith, have been anemically interpreted. They have been interpreted in such a way as to be too soft, too easy, and too limited. Namely, the two fundamental errors involve Christmas and Easter.

The way the story goes is that you have this person who is part of the Godhead, part of the Trinity, and this person incarnates and puts on human flesh, and becomes a human being just like the rest of us. And WOW! What a cool thing that is! Therefore we have this big shindig at Christmas, celebrating Emanuel, God with us. And then this Emanuel lives with us for the better part of three years and heals and teaches and redeems and does all kinds of neat stuff.

Beating Death by Resurrection

Then toward the end, due to our spiritual immaturity, we pretty much can't handle it anymore. It's time to get rid of this guy, so we do, except that he resurrects. Oh my goodness! This is unprecedented. And therefore we venerate Christ to the max. Here is a totally unique event that has

happened, that is simply without parallel, and so we revere it, put it up on a pedestal. And we bow down and worship it as much as we possibly can. The degree to which we pay homage to it is a measure of how faithful we are.

Except that, what if we interpret it — the whole Christmas and Easter thing — what if we interpret it not as something really special that happened to one particular guy but rather as a paradigm, a model, an exemplar of what happens all the time and everywhere?

What if we entertain the thought that *you* are also an incarnate spirit? That *you* are a spirit? That prior to being born into this world, *you* were a spirit with a small “s” that was subsumed and part of and in communion with the Spirit with a large “S”? And *you* incarnated, and at the end of your life, even though we might mourn your loss or might be happy about your loss, but regardless, at the end, death has no hold whatsoever on *you* either. Not one wit. And *you* will return back into that communion.

What if we interpret those two core events as being models for what happens all the time in our lives? And Jesus was just the pioneer and not unique, the one to whom resurrection first happened.

While you’re entertaining that thought, let me change the subject for just a moment. The gospel of Mark ended in a rough way when the disciples ran away in fear. That’s the way it ended. But church authorities added another ending because they didn’t want to leave the original abrupt finish since it was a real downer.

But right toward the beginning of the last chapter of Mark, there’s a question I’d like to suggest to you in a universal kind of way.

Who Will Roll Away the Stone?

The women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome and perhaps a bunch of others, but anyway the immediate family of women had gone to the tomb in order to embalm the body. They had brought their spices. And when they got there, the stone was still in front of the tomb, and one of them asked, “Who will roll away the stone for us?”

I’d like to suggest that that is the question of our age. Every one of us is an incarnate soul made in God’s image. Made perfectly, no mistakes, in God’s image. We are all partakers in the divine nature, Peter says. And every single one of us, in one way or another, is blocked away, sequestered, imprisoned needlessly. “Who will roll away the stone?” A question for us in particular and for our age in general.

And now let me shift gears one more time. I would propose that the answer to that issue can be found in a number of different ways. Here’s a solution I would like to suggest to you: It comes from the movie “Lord of the Rings, which I like a whole lot. Let me describe one scene for you and interpret it as an answer to this theological issue.

The scene is that this evil ring that has been used to conquer the entire known world has been found, and it needs to be destroyed. So representatives of all the kingdoms of Middle Earth are convened in one area to decide what to do with the accursed ring.

Destroy the Ring in the Fires of Mt. Doom

Everybody is seated in a circle at Rivendell, where Elrond is the head person of this area. The ring is on a stone table in the middle of this group. They talk about it for a while, and they decide that the ring must be destroyed.

So impulsive Gimli, who is a dwarf and whose weapon of choice is an axe, says, “Well, what are we waiting for?” He grabs his axe, goes over to the table, and swings it down hard on the ring. The metal of the axe shatters, and Gimli ends up on his back on the ground. There’s not a scratch on the ring. A pause comes upon everybody as they realize that they are dealing with something serious, a perilous evil.

Elrond, the host, then says, “The ring cannot be destroyed, Gimli, son of Glóin, by any craft that we here possess. The ring was made in the fires of Mount Doom. Only there can it be unmade. The ring must be taken deep into Mordor and cast back into the fiery chasm from whence it came. One of you must do this.”

Boromir, a prince of the kingdom next to evil Mordor, says in response, “One does not simply walk into Mordor. Its black gates are guarded by more than just Orcs. There is evil there that does not sleep. The great Eye is ever watchful. It is a barren wasteland riddled with fire, ash, and dust. The very air you breathe is a poisonous fume. Not with ten thousand men could you do this. It is folly.”

Evil Is Explicit; Good Is Implicit

I love the way they talk, but Boromir said something important: “There is evil there that does not sleep.” And of course it’s related to the evil Wizard and the Sauron and Saruman and all those guys. Except that, even though this is named, what is not named, what is not made explicit, is that a good is being awakened in everybody else. In other

words, here’s one little scene that points out the magnitude and the strength and the oppressiveness of the evil.

The entire balance of the twelve hours of the epic is the awakening of good in everybody else in response to the evil. The talk about the evil is explicit, whereas the good that is being awakened is subtle. It is implicit. It is rather something emerging, and there is good in the heart of every human at the center of all of creation. That good is the life and the love and the spirit and the grace that eventually emerges and grows to overcome the evil.

We can live our lives — and right now, considering the politics of our country and all the characteristics of our culture and the things we are dealing with that we see in the news every day — we can live our lives looking at the evil, and we can become enamored of it. Oh, it isn’t that bad, and we can wring our hands and go to a therapist because of our depression.

Or we can look at the emerging good that is at the heart of every single person because of who we are, made in the image and likeness of God, every single one of us.

We can take those Christmas and Easter stories and appropriate them to ourselves as well. We also have an Emanuel character, and death has no hold on us either. We can live that way.

It’s beautiful. It’s exquisite. It’s luminescent, much like a pearl.

Amen.