

July 19, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

LFLC

About a month ago, Nicholas Bone sent me a link to an essay
written by the Rev. Dr. N.T. Wright—a British theologian,
Anglican priest, Bishop, Professor and Author—
a real intellectual and ecclesiastical heavyweight.

The essay entitled “God and the Pandemic”
was available on Amazon for \$6.00 CDN,
so I downloaded it on to my tablet and read it that very night.

It didn’t take long for me to discover that, like Nicholas,
I was struck by what Wright wrote (I couldn’t resist putting it that way)--
and his words and thoughts, his perceptions and reflections
have been running around in my otherwise empty head
ever since I finished reading it. . .and re-reading it.

While I don’t intent to summarize or capture much of what he said,
I do want to highlight a few things that I think
are particularly relevant. . .and troubling—
that is, that do and should disturb and challenge us—
much as the words of the prophets did in ancient days.

And one of the most important points, to me at least,
is his statement that the church’s mission began
with three things which are familiar to us these days:
Tears; locked doors; and doubt.

He describes how Jesus appears to his disciples and friends
in the days following his resurrection:
to Mary, weeping at the tomb;
to the disciples hiding behind locked doors out of fear;
and to Thomas, who doubted. . .and whose doubts
were erased by the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side--
the scars which proved his identity and revealed the depth of his love.

And in the days thereafter, when Jesus and his followers
are gathered in the upper room
where he prepares them for his departure
and the promised coming of the Spirit,
he commissions them to bring new life to all
by doing the very things he had done in his ministry—
that is, to give bread to the hungry; sight to the blind;
healing to the sick; and life to the dead.

Those same works of love were encouraged by St. Paul
 who, in his very first letter, he tells the Galatians “to do good to all people.”

And in the days and years that followed,
 the outside world couldn't believe what they saw—
 that when faced with plagues and pandemics,
 that the early Christians pitched in and nursed people,
 sometimes saving lives and sometimes losing their own.

Their strong belief in God's promise of life beyond the grave
 gave them a kind of fearlessness which enabled them
 to be cheerful in the face and the fact of death
 and go to the aid of sufferers whose families and communities
 had abandoned them for fear of catching the diseases
 that killed so many.

And in the centuries which followed,
 the way that Christians behaved in the great plagues
 was a significant factor in contributing to the spread and growth of the faith.

For instance, the plague which swept through Rome in 170 CE
 which killed the Emperor Marcus Aurelius,
 plus the plagues in 250 and then again in the early 4th century
 led the Emperor Justinian, who was persecuting Christians,
 to complain that the Christians were much better
 at looking after the poor, the sick and the dying
 than the ordinary non-christian population.

As Wright puts it: “Justinian was trying to lock the stable door
 after the horse had already bolted” because
 Christians were being for the world
 what Jesus had called them to be. . .
 and people took notice that something new was happening
 and chose to be part of it.

In the same way, around the time of Martin Luther,
 when the Bubonic Plague known as the “Black Death”
 raced across globe killing over 200 million people--
 roughly half the population of the then-knownworld—
 it was the Christian clergy and laity who tended the sick,
 comforted the dying and fed the hungry.

Indeed, through what we call Europe's “Dark Ages” and into the “Middle Ages”
 and then through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment—
 for almost 1800 years, it was the church, and not the state. . .
 that built hospitals and hospices;

that provided education to those outside the circles of the elite;
and took care of the poor, the hungry and the disenfranchised
when the state did not or refused to do so.

And Christians carried out those tasks at considerable
and often fatal risk to themselves because they believed
that that was what Jesus called them to be and to do.
They grieved and lamented over the sorrow they saw;
they rejoiced at the promise they had of Christ's presence with them;
and they loved as their Lord loved them and called them to love others.

And that was the case until about 200 years ago
when the state began to assume the responsibility
of providing health care by taking over and running hospitals
that had been founded by churches;

by providing education by taking over colleges and universities
which Christian organizations had started and funded—
like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Princeton and others;

and by setting up state-sponsored social and financial safety nets
to protect those who previously depended
upon religious organizations for assistance.

And while Christians rejoiced and were grateful to have the “secular” world
take over and take credit for much of what the Jesus-followers used to do—
the end result was that the church shifted its focus
from “doing good” for others. . .
and allowed itself to slide into what Wright calls
an “escapist evangelism and spirituality” in which
a “personal salvation project” became dominant—
meaning that preparing believers to go to heaven
was now the paramount reason to believe in and follow Jesus.

This newly-emphasized focus on “going to heaven”
inevitably resulted in the state taking over the centre of public life
and pushing the church on to the margins of the culture or society,
meaning, that in many ways, the state was and is
now determining what the role of the church is to be.

And so, in a time when health-care professionals and government officials
“require” or “recommend” that people do this and that
in order to be safe and remain safe and keep others safe—
churches were and, in many cases still are, locked up
and worship services are being held over the internet
for people to view and participate in at home.

To be sure, there are good and understandable reasons for this result.

And yet, says Wright, there is a danger of accidentally
 sending the wrong signal to the wider world
 about religion and religious life—
 namely, that “religion is a personal and private matter”—
 and that faith and spirituality no longer have a place
 or a voice in the public square.

For example, the state says we can still go shopping
 at grocery stores, liquor stores and take-out stores,
 but we cannot, or should not, go and sit and pray and worship
 in a much-loved locked church building.

So, according to Wright, not only has worship become invisible,
 but churches have accepted this new directive by agreeing
 that corporate worship can be temporarily abolished
 and we can only join with others on live-streamed
 or “zoomed” services from the pastor’s home office.

In such ways, writes Wright, we may be conceding that we,
 as Christians, are just a group of like-minded individuals
 pursuing our rather odd and archaic private hobby.

And the danger of “e-worship” (electronic worship)
 is that it can become. . .and, in many ways, has become
 “p-worship”—that is, private and personal worship. . .
 implying that religion, faith and spiritual connections and convictions
 are no longer really important to the society and culture in which we live.

Now, it is true that, because of zoom and live-streaming that many people
 who would not have attended a church before the pandemic
 have taken advantage of the opportunity to share in “virtual worship”.
 And that is a good thing for sure.

And yet, as Wright puts it: “For centuries our churches
 have been physical and often, audible, reminders
 of the vital dimension of life which Western modernity
 has tried to crowd out. . .and, in many ways, succeeded in doing so.

In other words, he is concerned with the ways in which the church,
 faced with a major world-wide crisis
 about which faith has something to say—and needs to say—
 has, instead, meekly endorsed and followed
 what seems to be a secularizing lead.

Now, Wright admits, and I agree with him, that he feels caught
between two competing and contrary viewpoints:

The one which requires that we, as believers,
are to be responsible and scrupulously careful.

After all, this is neither a time nor is it appropriate at all
to have would-be devout but misguided people
ignoring safety regulations because they believe that,
as Christians, they are automatically protected against disease. . .
or, as those block-headed, and therefore, dangerous preachers say:
“You’ll be safe inside a church because neither the devil
nor the virus can get in there.”

Such superstitious nonsense is not only appalling
but it gives Christianity a bad name and turns faith into a mockery
for Christians and non-Christians alike.

At the same time, the debate about locking churches up
stirs up controversies between those for whom
worshipping in a building has been a vital part
of their spiritual life and development. . .
and those for whom the cry for public worship is irrelevant
because one can worship God anywhere and at any time.

Now, it could be that in the days to come that we will see signs
of genuine new possibilities for the church—
new ways of carrying out our mission
which will not only tap into old systems
but invent new and better ways of being church.

Or perhaps, more likely, we will just go back to “business as usual”
in the sense of the same old squabbles,
the same old shallow analyses and solutions,
and the same old focus on putting more bums in the benches
and more money in the plates.

By now, I am sure some of you are saying to yourselves,
“What does any of this have to do with today’s readings?”

Well, as with everything I have said up to now
that is full of ambiguities and uncertainties,
the text from Matthew’s Gospel is full of the same—
meaning that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible,
to tell what is right and what it not, who is good and who is not,
who are the insiders and who are not.

And while it is difficult and complicated for us
 to live with this lack of clarity at any time,
 it is perhaps even more so in this time.
 And that may be why the author of Matthew
 had Jesus say something Jesus probably didn't say—
 that is, provide the explanation to his parable.

As we heard in the reading, Jesus takes the disciples aside
 and gives them the key to understanding the parable—
 that is, the explanation to the whole thing:
 He is the sower, the field is the world,
 the weeds belong to the devil and the wheat to God.

Everything equals something else with nothing left over—
 which kind of makes one wonder why, after laying it all out like that—
 why Jesus didn't just say it that way in the first place.

And this is why, as I said a moment ago,
 Jesus probably never explained his parables. . .
 since most do not have explanations attached to them. . .
 and those that do, according to many scholars,
 indicate that the writers telling these parables later on
 had a lot of trouble with the ambiguity and uncertainty
 of Jesus' words and world, and so took the liberty
 of making a few additions so that no one heard them later on
 could or would misunderstand what Jesus REALLY meant.

You see, parable are mysteries that can have multiple interpretations
 to multiple situations and people living in different places and times.
 And so, parables can be hard to understand--
 while explanations, on the other hand,
 are easier to understand and to teach.

And we love the concept of explanations.
 because they let us know where we stand;
 they give us something to work with,
 a tool with which to improve ourselves and the world.

An explanation gives us something to put on the church sign
 that captures the attention of passers-by, like "Don't Let the Weeds Take Over".
 Nice, eh? A crisp, clever and tidy title for this morning's sermon. . .
 except it isn't, of course. . .since this morning's sermon
 is full of ambiguities and uncertainties
 which make us uncomfortable and uneasy
 because we aren't sure where the sermon is leading
 or what it means. . .or might mean. . .for us.

So, while Matthew may have been clear
 that there are only two kinds of people in the world—
 the weeds and the wheat—his viewpoint doesn't ring true to us
 because most of us encounter both weeds and wheat
 in ourselves, in our neighbours, and in the world around us.
 And so the whole business of gathering and burning the weeds
 at harvest-time ought to make us more than a little nervous.

Let me try to get at this another way by asking you a question. . .
 and bring this uncomfortable sermon and topic to an end. . .for now.

Maybe you have bought or been offered bottled water recently.
 Did you notice if it said "purified" on it?
 And, if so, did you assume that meant that the water was totally pure?
 What if you learned that bottled water, even purified,
 always has some contaminants in it? Would you still drink it?
 Of course, we would. In fact, you probably did.

Jesus' parable of the weeds among the wheat
 reminds us of our desire for purity.
 And so, it is tempting on first reading the parable
 to immediately ask ourselves,
 So, who is a weed and who is wheat?

We might wonder if the people we don't like much are weeds.
 Or we might also be anxious to know whether or not *we* are wheat,
 whether we are children, and inheritors, of the kingdom.
 Sorting it all out now and purifying the field
 would make things a lot simpler, cleaner, clearer.

Except the parable says we don't get to sort things out!
 Surprisingly, Jesus says it is better to live with ambiguity and uncertainty--
 to accept the impurity in ourselves and in others.
 And why? Maybe it is because we risk great harm
 to ourselves and others in trying to obtain a level of purity or holiness
 we can never achieve in this life.

As we all know, that need to distinguish the weeds from the wheat,
 especially among religious people, can be very strong, even overwhelming.

And for some of us, that means getting rid of people
 who fail to live up to certain moral standards;
 while for others of us, it means judging people
 based on who we label them to be.

But, the reality is, total purity is impossible.

It doesn't exist in nature, nor in humanity as a whole,
 nor in any single person, including you. . .and me.
 So rather than worrying about who to keep
 and who to get rid of, we can trust Jesus' assurance
 that we are included among the children of the kingdom by God's grace.

And when we know and believe that we are included, accepted and loved,
 then we don't need to worry about the status of others.

That's for God to worry about.
 Our only responsibility is to take advantage of our freedom
 to love and to care for others. . .and ourselves. . .
 and let God sort out the rest.

And now, to wrap this up as best I can—
 which, I assure you, won't be tidy and crisp or easy.

Because, you see, I don't know what the answers are
 to the difficult questions and issues I raised earlier
 in my reflections on Wright's essay.
 I also don't know if there really are answers
 that we could or would find or provide that might help.

I don't even know if it is acceptable or worthwhile or appropriate
 to raise these issues at a time like this
 when nerves are raw and hidden fears are exposed—
 when tears and locked doors and doubts are confronted
 and challenged by Jesus' call to come and follow him. . .

to take up his cross and die with him. . .
 and then to live with him, to live in him, to live for him
 by doing as he did for us—by giving ourselves to others. . .
 by taking the risk of giving our lives for others.

I don't know whether it is possible for us, at a time like this—
 when we are so vulnerable and, in many ways,
 so fearful of making a mistake, a well-meaning but wrong decision
 that may end up bringing tragedy or sorrow to ourselves or another—
 to even want to struggle with such questions.

I don't know whether it is reasonable to expect anyone
 to hear what I am saying and not stop reading
 or not turn off the video or not walk out the door.

In fact, I'm sure there are some listening to or reading
 these observations. . .questions. . .challenges--
 these conflicting and contrary opinions and perceptions—
 I'm sure that there are those who are unhappy or distressed
 at the fact that I have even raised these issues. . .
 and that I am inviting us to have conversations with ourselves
 and/or discussions with others about such dilemmas. . .such quandaries.

But I have done it anyway because I believe,
 that whether I am right or wrong to do so. . .
 that I am called to do so. . .that we are called. . .
 to wrestle with such complex issues,
 even if we don't or can't or won't
 come up with resolutions or conclusions or decisions.

For me, that is part and parcel of being Christians—"Christ-ones"—
 living a world of ambiguity and uncertainty. . .
 and still, as the Prayer of Thanksgiving we will hear later puts it:
 "to love, not as ought, but as we are able. . ."

To do best as we can, in bearing witness to the One
 who did all that he could and gave all that he did. . .
 for us. . .and to us. . .and now calls us to. . .
 now calls us to. . .

You finish that sentence. . .that thought. . .and end this sermon
 with that famous Lutheran question that we should ask ourselves
 at the end of every sermon: "What does this mean?"
 "What does this mean?"

Amen. SDG