

Two Understandings – When Friends Disagree

Eastertide II

Scripture: Galatians 2:11-14; Luke 24:28-43

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It must be obvious to everyone that this world needs to learn to engage in conversation and dialogue to be honest with each other and to listen to each other, in order that we might live in peace. Our world is breaking apart because we can't speak to each other or hear each other.

I am using this occasion, the week after Easter, to think about the resurrection from two perspectives, because in May we are having two scholars come our way who differ on their understanding of the resurrection. And they are coming in order to stimulate conversation among the faith community of western Michigan, to be a model for a manner in which such conversation can take place.

Marcus Borg, who has been here a couple of times and is a real friend of this congregation, will be joined by N. T. Wright, who is an excellent scholar and who happens to be a very good friend of Marcus. N. T. Wright is the Canon of Westminster Abbey. If you watch the funeral on Tuesday of the Queen Mum, I am wondering whether N. T. Wright may be a part of that, since he is the Canon of that great cathedral in London. They were in school together at Oxford and became friends, respecting each other, holding each other in high esteem, and yet differing in their perspectives. They become a good model for a way in which religious people can differ with one another and yet not break community, and converse with one another and seek to deepen the understanding one of another and to enhance that understanding.

N. T. Wright is a rather traditional, evangelical scholar. He is an excellent scholar, but his position is traditional and evangelical, it is what probably you grew up with, what I grew up with, the kind of position that I preached for many, many years. Marcus Borg represents a position, an understanding of the resurrection or a biblical interpretation which takes into account the developments of modernity and critical studies of scripture. Anytime you have a difference in your understanding of the resurrection or any question, you can be sure it goes back to a difference in understanding of biblical interpretation.

The book that Marcus and Tom Wright wrote together, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, has chapters, each of them contributing a chapter, on, for example, The Resurrection, the Virgin Birth, Is Jesus God?, What Difference Does It Make?, and so forth. It is a very interesting dialogue they carry on between them. When I read N. T. Wright, I read my past. When I read Marcus Borg, I read someone who has taken account of the critical studies of scripture and the whole drift of the post- Enlightenment world that seeks to understand phenomena apart from the miraculous or the interventions of some supernatural incursion into this world.

And so, obviously for me, I understand, I stand with Marcus Borg, but I respect N. T. Wright as probably as fine a spokesperson as one could have of that traditional point of view. Just to have them speaking together and expressing their differing perspectives brings before us a model of conversation and understanding that I think is very positive, for it is possible to differ with another without writing the other off or living in alienation and separation. We don't do that very well in the religious world. God knows we've not done that very well in the church. Congregations have been split; denominations have been formed over lesser differences than the differences between N. T. Wright and Marcus Borg on the resurrection.

To hear them, to watch them, to observe them relating to one another, in this case, in the pages of this book, becomes a lesson, a model, for how we can engage one another and respect one another, learn from one another, and continue in relationship, even though we understand that we differ in our perspectives and in our interpretations.

As I said, N. T. Wright has a traditional view of the resurrection. If you would read the chapter in the book, *The Meaning of Jesus*, that he writes on the resurrection, you would find him insisting on some kind of bodily physicality as a sign or as a mark of resurrection. He is a very bright man and he understands the issues clearly, and he is careful, and so he is careful to indicate that he is not talking about the resuscitation of a corpse, obviously. Nonetheless, he wants to insist on the necessity of the empty tomb; for N. T. Wright, if the tomb is not empty, there is no Easter. There has been no resurrection.

Now, Marcus Borg, on the other hand, says the empty tomb is a matter of indifference. He doesn't care if it is empty or not. If the bones, the skeletal remains of Jesus should be found, through DNA tracing sometime, Marcus wouldn't care, because, for him, the resurrection is not about a corpse coming to life, but a life in God, a spiritual existence that is still experienced as a presence among those who knew Jesus and followed him. Marcus loves to go to what is also my favorite resurrection story, the Emmaus Road, two men journeying from Jerusalem on Easter. They are sad of heart because of the events of Good Friday, and they are joined by a stranger whom they do not recognize. As readers, we know that it is Jesus. He says, "Why are you sad of heart?" They say, "Well, where

have you been?" And then he begins to speak to them about the scriptures, to interpret the scriptural tradition that what has happened is exactly what would have been expected in the prophetic books, and so forth. They come to the village and it is getting toward evening, and he makes as though he would go on, and they say, "Come in to us," and so he comes into their home, he acts as the host, he blesses the bread and breaks it and gives it to them, and "poof," he is gone. But in the breaking of the bread, they recognize him, and they say, "Now that we think of it, did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke to us along the way?"

It is a beautiful story, reminding us, of course, of the experience of the Eucharist. Luke is writing this Gospel story some 50 years after the events. There is a congregation, a community to whom he is writing, a community, obviously, that shares the Eucharist. What Luke is saying to them is that the presence of the living Lord is experienced in the community in the breaking of bread. The sacramental nature of the Church is the medium by which the risen Christ is experienced in the community. There is no body there. They don't recognize this person. Obviously, this isn't the corpse coming out of the grave. It is a symbolic metaphor. It is a beautiful, beautiful story. If only Luke would not have given us the next paragraph, because now they run back to Jerusalem and meet with the disciples and a few others on Easter night, and they say, "The Lord was made known to us," and they learn that Peter also had an experience, and now they are gathered there and "poof," there he is again. But, now N. T. Wright is smiling all over the place because now this risen one seems to want to underscore a certain physicality. Even though he came "poof" into the room, nonetheless, he says, "Handle me." And then he says, "Do you have anything to eat?" So now we are dealing with the kind of physicality that is other than that of the Emmaus Road story.

Well, Marcus Borg would say that is a later edition that indicates a time when faith was being tested and there was a tendency to speak about a ghost-like existence, but lacking reality, and so there was a kind of concreteness that was shadowed forth in this story in order to say, "Look, this thing is real this substance here."

Well, the biblical scholars can talk back and forth, and some of you are in one paragraph and some of you are in another, and that is perfectly all right. That is the way it should be. But, as a matter of fact, both Tom and Marcus would say that Easter is the originating event of the Church and that Easter, in its summary, is Jesus lives and Jesus is Lord, that the experience of Jesus post-crucifixion, the experience, whether it was in some kind of story, some kind of appearance such as Luke records here in Emmaus, or in Jerusalem, or whether, whatever it is, there was a community of people that gathered post-crucifixion that said, "Jesus lives." And believing that Jesus was alive, that Jesus had not simply died and was gone, they said Jesus was right. This was God's vindication of the way of Jesus, of the life of Jesus, of that which Jesus embodied, of that which came to expression in Jesus.

And so, what difference does it make whether the tomb is filled with the remains of Jesus, or the tomb is empty, If there is a community of people that are united in the fact that what was embodied in Jesus is a way of life and grace?

I cited last week that paragraph about how the caterpillar is transformed into the butterfly. The caterpillar carried with it from the egg certain cells. The zoologist calls them imaginal cells. Imaginal. I love it. Those are the cells that have the blueprint of the butterfly. Those cells have the genes for legs and for wings, and that old caterpillar, scrounging around on the ground, suddenly finds something happening to its physical being that at first is attacked by the caterpillar's immune system as something foreign but, eventually the new take over and there emerges the butterfly, because that caterpillar was not made to crawl, but to fly. It was not made to be a fuzzy worm, but a multi-colored butterfly in the sky. Now, if the transformation takes place, what does it matter what the process is? If the reality is there, then what is the big deal about the historical details that surround it, for one a literal story of a body coming out of a tomb, for another, a spiritual transformation, but for both, a transforming presence that is a sign that in this cosmic journey of ours there is a bias toward life, creativity. If one comes to that conclusion, then one can allow that another may come by it in another way. Why start a new church? Why walk out on the sermon? Why begin a new denomination?

Now I don't mean to say that distinctions are not important and differences cannot be significant. Paul, for example, a Jew who was convinced that the way of Jesus was dangerous, was undercutting the traditions of Israel and therefore had to be stamped out. Paul has an experience, a vision. He is blinded. He contemplates. He is turned around 180 degrees, and he becomes the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul who was on the way to stamp out the Way becomes the one who says in his transforming experience, "This must be God's move to include the nations, the Gentiles." Paul never became anything else than a Jew and Paul never rejected his Jewish religious faith. Paul was a Jew; Jesus was a Jew and they, understood the God of Israel to be the only God there was, but what Paul saw now was the possibility of all people coming into the relationship and the covenant community of this people of Israel. As Paul said, "You know what? They don't have to become Jews. The grace of God is sufficient. They can come directly to God without coming by way of Moses with circumcision and dietary laws and all of that. For Paul, that was a transforming experience. That was a total change of paradigm. It didn't have to be another religion. It was simply the same God of Israel embracing all by grace.

Well, what about the rest of Jesus' Jewish disciples? What about Peter, for example? Well, Peter had an experience, too, at the house of Cornelius. He has a vision, "Go preach in Cornelius' house, the Roman centurion." He is preaching and the Holy Spirit falls upon that house and he says, "O my God, now what?" Now, they got it, too, but Peter was not the man that Paul was, with all due

respect to the Roman Catholic Church. Paul saw through. Paul glimpsed grace. Paul saw something new.

Peter granted it, but it wasn't the passion of his life. And so, now they are out in the mission field, out in Galatia, in the community that had started as a result of Paul's preaching, and these are Gentile people now. It is not kosher. The table is not kosher. That's okay with Peter. Peter intellectually knows the truth. It doesn't matter. It's a religious thing. Religious things don't matter. They're optional. You choose them, or they choose you, and you follow them and that is fine. But, they are not absolutes. It's not as though a lightning bolt is going to hit you. And so, Peter has ham and buns in Galatia. But then, somebody comes from Mother Church in Jerusalem, some of James' people, and Peter sidles past the table with the ham and buns, and he moves over to the kosher table. Paul says, "Peter, you're wrong. You're not wrong to stay kosher. Stay kosher, if that is your choice. But, don't eat one way one day and another way another day because the food is there. Have integrity and authenticity in your person.

And so Paul confronts a friend, not about whether he is right or wrong, but about the consistency of behavior. And so, I believe, in the church, as well. It is not as though we need to agree on a lot of things, but the thing we need to be able to do in the community of faith is to talk about it and to move for integrity of understanding and action, so that where our perspectives differ, fine. That's okay. But, is there enough that unites us that is common that we can celebrate together so that we don't break *community*? If it is to be authentic community, then we are also able to confront issues and be honest one with another in order that it may be an authentic community, because you see, the human experience is the experience of being rooted in history and, therefore, marked by limited understanding. And that limited understanding means that there are no absolutes. There may be an absolute, but every human perspective is relative, and every human understanding is a partial and tentative understanding on the way, hopefully, to fuller understanding. And so it is in the church. Peter could have stayed Jewish. Israel is ongoing. Israel lives today. There would not have been any problem with Peter continuing his Jewish faith. Paul's point to him was don't equivocate between the two. Don't be hypocritical. Be honest in your faith and in your behavior.

Friends can differ, and those differences can be argued and can be grounded and founded and legitimate. There is no one to say it is this way and no other way is possible. But, when we get an insight, as Paul did, when there is a breakthrough, we ought to be able to bring it to expression and talk about it. For example, western values in our world - can we talk about them? What about that which looms on the horizon, the possibility of civilizational clash? Are we able to express our values in the most articulate and persuasive way possible, without having to kill one another?

What about in the Church, for example? In the question of sexual orientation, we begin to understand some things. We understand things about the human creature. We understand the diversity of creation. We understand that this is not a matter of choice, but is a given. Then, what is the Church to do? To go on with its bias and its prejudice? Damning and separating people and cutting them out? Of course not. And if the Church does that as an institution, it has to be addressed. The point has to be made so we can be engaged in conversation and dialogue, not to break community, but in order to make community honest and authentic and open.

There is no party line here and I value the diversity of understanding and perspective. Don't expect the pulpit to dot every i and cross every t and be able to embrace it all. I have a point of view and I have a responsibility to make it as clear as I can, and I will. But I promise you, as well, that I'll listen and we can continue to talk about these things together. If you'd like a shot at it, come on Wednesday night. We can have a good free-for-all about six weeks in a row with differing perspectives authored by two friends who come at it differently, but in the exchange, help all of us to come to a clearer understanding of where we are and why.

God knows the world needs conversation, or we will kill each other.

References:

Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.