

“Deciding Who Burns”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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“Gospel of grace” doesn’t sound quite right, does it? Where in this text is gospel, good news, and where in this text is grace? I am not overjoyed to read about burning and the weeping and gnashing of teeth. I am uncomfortable and unsettled. I’d rather not read about judgment and fire. I’d rather not believe in a God who burns people up.

Of course, if I’m being brutally honest, there are a handful of people I wouldn’t mind if God burned. Is that acceptable in a pastor? Before you judge me, I want to know if you are absolutely sure you would let Hitler off the hook? What about Ted Bundy or Timothy McVeigh? What about the leader of an international human trafficking operation or the shooter who walks into a church or into an elementary school and opens fire? Do any of them deserve to burn?

If you are a prisoner in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany, is this parable gospel, good news to you? To hear there will be a reckoning in the end? If you are an African woman whose child was torn from your arms and sold to a stranger in the market by the slave trader, is this parable gospel, good news, to you? Can *anything* be good news to you? Is the thought that someday they will burn for this *enough*? It doesn’t give you your child back, so no, it’s not good news. It’s a minimal amount of justice, perhaps, but not enough to bring you real relief. What if you are a teenager kidnapped by a pimp and sold for sex sixteen times a day? Is this parable gospel, good news to you?

From one angle, this parable sounds violent and harsh. From another angle, it doesn’t sound harsh enough. Why doesn’t God smite the evil ones *now* before more people get hurt and more innocent lives are lost? Why doesn’t God intervene *now* before more immigrant children are separated from their parents and more sick children are stripped of health care? Why doesn’t God do *more* now? Why does God tarry?

I suspect if we took a poll of the room, we might be divided as to whether the bad guys ought to burn and of course it would depend on how we defined “bad guy” and how we defined “burn.” If we voted, we’d likely have some pacifist dissenters, but we might elect to go ahead and let Hitler burn, no matter how hot or how long the fire. Some of us might add: the hotter the better.

I wonder . . . what about Hitler’s right hand man—same sentence? The commanders in his army? What about his secretary? The man who shined his shoes? What about the German family who found Hitler appalling but were too afraid to do anything about it? Should they burn too? What about the single mom who didn’t know what to do so she just focused on getting enough food on the table for her little ones day after day in Hitler’s Germany?

What about the KKK and the lynching mobs? Do they deserve to burn? If your answer is no, would you feel differently if it was a black face you *knew* hanging from that tree? If the answer

is yes, does that include everyone who came by the thousands to view a lynching as if it were entertainment? Does that include the person in the crowd who was sickened by it all, but didn't speak up? Does that include the children who were there? If they were what, younger than 18, they deserve a pass? Younger than 16? 12? 8? It is a complicated business, deciding who burns.

If God had burned up the lynching crowds right then and there, would some of us white folk even exist, or would our great-great-great grandparents have died in the fire before bearing children? What if you've been brainwashed to believe black bodies equal bad? Surely heads do deserve to roll for that, but whose? Your parents? Who brainwashed them? The preacher? The government? The devil? The media? It's hard to say.

Separating wheat from the tares is a taxing and miserable job, but it sure seems like *somebody's* got to do it if we're going to keep our children safe—safe from violence, safe from corruption. But according to this parable, God isn't going to do anything about it until judgment day, when it is too late, and the damage has been done.

Oh wait, I almost forgot. You came to church hoping to feel better about God and the plight of the world, not worse, right? Sorry.

I think it helps to remember this isn't the only parable Jesus tells about seeds and the kingdom of heaven. Directly after the wheat and the tares, for example, he says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." It's like, God's Kingdom will grow bigger than you can imagine.

Meanwhile, while you're waiting for that kingdom to grow tall, blossom, and bloom, a lot of bad stuff happens in the interim. People are murdered. Children are abused. In story form, Jesus attempts to address the problem of evil. We all know the problem of evil cannot be easily answered and it certainly cannot be fully answered in a single story—not even a story by Jesus. As we attempt to find meaning in this one small story, let us not forget the larger story of Jesus' life.

You may remember that a lot of Jews expected the Messiah to be a warrior. They were looking for a leader who would bring God's wrath upon the Romans and free them from oppression. Only Jesus did no such thing. In fact, he laid the groundwork for the growth of the early church and the radical notion that Gentiles could belong to God too. He healed people and spent time with people whom everyone thought for sure were tares and weeds, the scum of the earth—tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, a Roman centurion, the demon-possessed, the beggars and the lame.

I take it that in this parable Jesus is addressing the fact that yes, there are real evils among you, no doubt, and those evil deeds did not come from God. They are not a part of God's design for the field. But the truth of the matter is that if it were up to us, we'd wipe out more than just the tares. We'd use toxic pesticides and destructive chemicals. We'd take out a lot of good wheat while hunting down tares. We humans are always looking for someone to blame. We're always

looking for some weed to whom we can compare ourselves so we can be sure that we are wheat. We make broad sweeping judgments about who is tare and who is wheat, and we find it infuriating that God doesn't do more to stop the tares and free the wheat.

Jesus reminds us it is not that simple. Jesus resists the expectation that he will take up arms and smite the Romans, which is gospel, good news for the Romans but challenging news for the conquered.

When I think of the human beings in this world who are the most oppressed, frankly I am not sure I agree with God's decision to allow the perpetrators space in the field. That seems like a mistake to me. And yet, I am also aware that separating perpetrator from victim is not always as clear cut as I think, that separating people into categories too swiftly allows me to ignore the perpetrator parts of me and the victimized parts of some perpetrators. Which is not to say we are all equal parts perpetrators and equal parts victim as if our choices had no bearing on our wheaty-ness or weedy-ness. But when we make judgments too quickly, we cut off the possibility of redemption for the tares and redemption for what is torn in us. We take away the hope of "Once I was lost, but now I am found, was blind, but now I see."

Now, I still feel there are some people God should go ahead and smite right here and right now before they do more damage. But I'm willing to admit there might be a reason I'm not God and that my understanding might be limited. I'm willing to imagine that God's refusal to relate to this world through retaliation and judgment is more of a mercy than I realize. I am willing to admit that ultimately I have no idea what will happen at the end of the age when the day of reckoning arrives. Will I be prepared to see people I'd called tares welcomed into the fold, to realize if it had been up to me, they wouldn't be here right now, and if it were up to them, neither would I?

It's confusing and messy for sure, this field in which we've been planted. As it turns out, there will always be people among us thriving and soaking up the same air and sunshine we do, who we will think do not deserve to be here. But it is not up to us to decide.

This does not mean we cannot name evil when we see it or that we should be silent in the face of injustice. But perhaps it means that when it comes to human beings, we don't get to destroy them. We don't get to say who is bad and who deserves to burn. We don't get to write people off just because we disagree with them or feel they are tares. While we could debate for hours whether suspending our wrath actually makes sense when it come to people like Hitler, my suspicion is that Jesus would invite us to look a little closer to home. Who in your more immediate circle have you deemed to be a tare for whom the label might not be so accurate? Could there be a reason God hasn't yet intervened and removed them from your life? Despite how much they irritate you, is it possible there is some wheaty-ness in them you hadn't seen before? Is it possible there is some weedy-ness in you that this obnoxious person brings into the light?

I want to be clear I am *not* suggesting that the abused ought to put up with the abuse, that the abuser is there to teach you about your own flaws. No. I am talking about a posture of nonviolence and the refusal to destroy life. I'm talking about the willingness to reevaluate our judgments about the people who baffle us and annoy us.

I am talking about the current polarization in our country and wondering whether in individual relationships that concrete black and whiteness, or blue and redness might be dismantled. I am wondering if God has a clearer vision than we do about the weedy-ness and wheaty-ness that persist side-by-side in humanity. I am wondering if we're all still a little bit blind—whether perhaps we ought not be in charge of categorizing people, whether it's best not left to us to purge the church, the party, the family, the faith.

I am wondering if, in the midst of all that we are so sure we know, there is still room left to *trust*. Whether in the midst of all our work drawing lines in the sand, there is still room left to *rest*. Whether in midst of all our doing and talking and critiquing, there is still room left for God to be God, for you and I to be limited, and for our enemy to be God's beloved.

This, I believe, is the challenging gospel of grace. Amen.