

“The Smallest of Seeds”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Mark 4:26-34
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on June 17, 2018

This past week, along with most of our church staff, I attended the CBF General Assembly, the yearly meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which means I spent two nights and three days separated from Blakely, who is just now six weeks old.

My mom kept her here in Waco while I traveled, and fortunately she would text me pictures every few hours to sustain me. The pictures came with captions that said things like, “Good morning, Mommy. I slept six hours and then I slept four hours. Grandma says I kept laughing in my sleep during the night. I miss you,” or “Mom! I burped!” or “Oops, Mom, I overshot my diaper and peed all over my clothes. I also keep sticking my finger up my nose while I’m eating.” I kept staring at my phone, wishing I could kiss those adorable cheeks through the screen. Every time I saw a baby at the conference, I felt achy and I wanted to run over and snuggle that stranger’s child as if it were mine.

When it was finally time to leave the conference, the valet went to get my car while I waited in front of the hotel lobby. I was so eager to go home. But then the valet walked up to me, holding my keys. “I’m sorry, but your car won’t start,” he said.

I walked with him to my car, and he asked if I had somewhere to be. *Yes!* I thought. *Blakely is expecting me. She’s probably walking by now, I’ve been gone so long, and if we don’t hurry up with this car, she’s going to say her first words before I’m home!* But I didn’t say that to him, because he was being so nice trying to help me. An hour and a half later, I was finally on my way back to Waco. When I pulled up to the house, my mom carried Blakely outside so I didn’t have to waste any time walking inside to greet her.

Thank the Lord, Blakely is coming with me to youth camp this week! My mom had offered a long time ago to come to youth camp with me so we could bring Blakely, but I had declined, because that just seemed like too much to ask. I didn’t want to do that to my mom. But more recently I remembered, my mom actually likes youth camp! Also, I realized, if I go a whole week without Blakely, I will probably die. And so I emailed the camp directors, can I bring my baby and can I bring my mom? Enthusiastically they said yes!

I remember thinking when I had Leila, my first foster baby, that if they took her away from me, I would die, and I seriously felt that way because I love her so much. When they did take her away on Good Friday to live with family, I thought of that Mary Oliver poem that begins, “That time I thought I could not go any closer to grief without dying, I went closer, and I did not die. Surely God had his hand in this, as well as friends.” Like Mary Oliver, I also did not die, but it hasn’t stopped me from feeling terrified I will lose Blakely too.

Foster care is complicated, of course, because I'm not the only parent in these scenarios. There are birth parents too, who in many cases, deeply miss their children, and I have to remain forever mindful that these babies are not truly mine, and if the birth families are able to care for them, they deserve to be with family. How can I not have empathy for the birth parents when I am so painfully aware how it feels to say goodbye to a child you love? Even deeper is my empathy for the children, these innocent babies, who have absolutely no choice in the matter, who were born into difficult and possibly dangerous circumstances through no fault of their own, and who are dependent on the government and the goodwill of the American people to receive the care they so desperately need.

My mom and I keep marveling at how easy it is to love these babies. You hear her cry in the night, and you think you are way too tired to feed her. But you get up anyway, because you are the only chance this baby has, and then you pick her up in your sleepy arms, look down into tiny eyes where the tears are forming, pull her close and smell her fresh baby smell, and instantly you are more in love than ever, which you didn't know was possible, and it just doesn't matter that it's 3am and you've barely slept, because she needs you and you love her. It's exhausting and sometimes difficult work, but you wouldn't trade it for anything.

I've lived my whole life without her, but now that she's here, I can't see how I could possibly survive five days at youth camp apart from her. Friends, have you ever loved a baby? Do you know that mystical way in which their helplessness tugs at you, pulls at you, binds you to them?

Now: can you imagine trying to raise your babies in an environment where their lives were in danger? Wouldn't you do everything in your power to keep them safe? Imagine if you made a long and difficult journey to keep them safe, much like Mary and Joseph when they took the infant Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath? Or like Moses' mother who hid her infant in a basket in the river? Can you imagine being so afraid for your children that you took a risk like that one? Can you imagine fleeing your home of origin, children in tow, leaving friends and other family and possessions behind because you are that desperate?

I've been watching *The Handmaid's Tale* on Hulu recently, and I've been strongly impacted by the characters in the show who attempt to flee Gilead and escape to Canada. I know that I am watching actresses, that these are fictional characters. Even still I can't help feeling deeply invested. As I watch these characters attempt to escape horrifying circumstances, I really want them to make it.

Can you imagine finally making it to your destination, to the place of safety, and when you arrive, instead of receiving aid and refuge, you are thrown into prison and, even worse, your children are ripped away from you? You don't know where they are going or if they will be safe. Can you imagine having your baby taken away? Can you imagine no one speaks your language, and no one is telling you how you can get your children back? Can you imagine being treated like a criminal for trying to keep your family safe, for fleeing dangerous conditions, for wanting a better life for your children? *Can you imagine?*

This isn't fiction. It is what is happening every day on our very own border. Just yesterday I read an article in Texas Monthly. It was interview with Anne Chandler, the director of a non-profit

that focuses on helping immigrant women and children. She's been traveling to detention centers and listening to parents' stories. Texas Monthly asked her what the process is for removing children from their parents, and I'm going to read you her answer.

She replied, "There is no one process. Judging from the mothers and fathers I've spoken to and those my staff has spoken to, there are several different processes. Sometimes they will tell the parent, "We're taking your child away." And when the parent asks, "When will we get them back?" they say, "We can't tell you that." Sometimes the officers will say, "because you're going to be prosecuted" or "because you're not welcome in this country," or "because we're separating them," without giving them a clear justification. In other cases, we see no communication that the parent knows that their child is to be taken away. Instead, the officers say, "I'm going to take your child to get bathed." That's one we see again and again. "Your child needs to come with me for a bath." The child goes off, and in a half an hour, twenty minutes, the parent inquires, "Where is my five-year-old?" "Where's my seven-year-old?" "This is a long bath." And they say, "You won't be seeing your child again." . . . I was talking to one mother, and she said, "Don't take my child away," and the child started screaming and vomiting and crying hysterically, and she asked the officers, "Can I at least have five minutes to console her?" They said no. In another case, the father said, "Can I comfort my child? Can I hold him for a few minutes?" The officer said, "You must let them go, and if you don't let them go, I will write you up for an altercation, which will mean that you [will have] additional charges charged against you." Parents are not getting any information on what their rights are to communicate to get their child before they are deported, what reunification may look like. We spoke to nine parents on this Monday, which was the 11th, and these were adults in detention centers outside of Houston. They had been separated from their child between May 23 and May 25, and as of June 11, not one of them had been able to talk to their child or knew a phone number that functioned from the detention center director. None of them had direct information from immigration on where their child was located. The one number they were given by some government official from the Department of Homeland Security was a 1-800 number. But from the phones inside the detention center, they can't make those calls. We know there are more parents who are being deported without their child, without any process or information on how to get their child back."¹

Obviously young children cannot be expected to navigate their own deportation case without a parent around. Anne stated that in the shelters, they are having trouble locating the parents because kids are crying inconsolably. They are five years old, sometimes younger. They don't know the full legal of their parents or their date of birth. They aren't in a position to describe the trauma that caused their family to migrate in the first place. Anne said, "None of the parents I talked to were expected to be separated as they faced the process of asking for asylum. They had no idea."

As Stephen Colbert said, "If that sounds evil to you, then good news, your ears are working."² What our country is doing to children and families at our border is dead wrong; there is no justification for this abhorrent behavior.

¹ Katy Vine, "What's Really Happening When Asylum-Seeking Families Are Separated?" <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news/whats-really-happening-asylum-seeking-families-separated/>

² "Jeff Sessions Cites the Bible in Separating Children from Parents," The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, June 14, 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4KaLkYxMZ8>

Sometimes it may feel like abhorrent behavior surrounds us on all sides, that it is beating down upon us like the heat of the sun, and what can we little people possibly do to stop it? Friends, I am here to remind you what Jesus said about the kingdom of God, which is that it is “like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

The kingdom of God is made up of people. You are the people. You are the seed. You feel small, but you are mighty. You feel helpless, but you are the shade tree of protection.

The kingdom of God is made up of people. You are the people, and so is the immigrant. There is no kingdom of God in which people are dispensable, in which children are traumatized as a deterrent to keep people out. That is not God’s kingdom; that is hell on earth.

The kingdom of God is not built with walls. The kingdom is made of branches, open to any bird in flight seeking refuge. Friends, do not, do not, do not give in to paralysis because you feel overwhelmed. Your only job is to be a seed’s worth of change, and anybody can do it. When you don’t know what to do or how to start, begin by planting a seed. In other words, do *something*, however small. The good news is, the growth of the seed is not up to you. That’s God’s miracle, waiting to happen. But the miracle of growth cannot begin until you plant the seed.

Jesus said it this way, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.”

Look, I don’t know how we are going to solve this mess in our country, but I don’t have to know. I just have to start planting, and trust that the way will open.

Today is Father’s Day, and my friend Aurelia recently told me a story about Camila Cabello’s father, and I haven’t been able to forget it.³ Camila Cabello has quickly become a world famous singer as the first woman in three years to reach Number One in the charts with her debut album. She came to the United States from Cuba as a child. Her mother, who worked as an architect in Cuba, left everything behind to get her family to the states. She and Camila were able to get visas, because they were Cuban, but Camila’s father was Mexican, which made it more difficult. He had to drop his wife and child off at the border and watch them go. He then worked to get his own visa, only he kept being denied. Finally, in desperation to see his family, he swam across the Rio Grande. *He swam the Rio Grande to be with his family.* He risked his life, he technically “broke the law” by entering illegally, but he describes his dangerous swim as the happiest journey of his life because it meant he would get to see his family.⁴

Today, on Father’s Day, I want to honor the fathers like him who make dangerous journeys to be with their families, who face detention and deportation all because they want to be with their

³ I am deeply indebted to Reverend Aurelia Davila Pratt for this entire sermon, as her ideas served as my inspiration throughout.

⁴ “Made in Miami: Artist Spotlight Story,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73_OWzBr8Fo

babies, and they want their babies to grow up safe. I want to honor the daddies who have been torn away from their children against their will, whose only crime was to enter this country illegally because they were desperate to help their families. I want to honor the fathers and the mothers who are hurting and alone, torn apart from their children. I want to pray for them. Weep for them. Pay attention to them. Stand with them. Fight for them. If you have your own children here with you and are able to hold them tight, do not take this for granted. Remember those children who have been taken, who are crying for their mommies and daddies, who do not speak English, who do not understand what is happening, who are scared and alone, who have no one to help them. As citizens of God's kingdom, let us join together and protect the children. Let us not give up. No matter how small our efforts may seem, let us not give up.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers. Lord, in your mercy, grow up shade trees of protection. Lord, in your mercy, may we be the branches. Lord, in your mercy, listen to the cries of your children. Amen.