

“It Disturbs Me”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus  
concerning Luke 18:15-17, Psalm 8:2, Matthew 18:6; Isaiah 11:6  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco  
on May 5, 2019

Last weekend I was away at the Alliance of Baptists Annual Gathering. If you didn’t know, or hadn’t picked up on this, here at Lake Shore we are not exactly your typical kind of Baptist. The Alliance of Baptists is an entire organization of Baptist congregations as weird as us. The kind of Baptists that value women, even when they speaking or leading. The kind of Baptists that work to be inclusive of everyone, that strive for justice, and care more about people than institutional power. They are my kind of Baptist.

I barely even knew the Alliance existed until I came to Lake Shore, a congregation that has been a member of Alliance since it’s early years, and boy have I been grateful for the introduction. The Alliance of Baptists gives me hope for the world and for the church. Every time I have the opportunity to go to the annual gathering, I leave changed, renewed. I leave smarter, I leave challenged. I leave feeling cared for. I leave having been reminded what church is all about. And just so you know, the annual gathering is not just for pastors—anyone can go and next year it will be in Fort Worth, not D.C.—so, if I were you, I would mark my calendars.

I’d like to share just a little bit with you about what I learned and what I experienced while at the Gathering this year. The theme this year was “What is Liberty Without Liberation?” which was a great theme. That being said, I sort of picked up on a secondary theme, which wasn’t intentional in terms of the planning and it may have just stood out to me because of where I am at in my own life, but something that came up again and again was children.

We heard from Alaa Hammouda, a Muslim woman from the Gaza Strip, who was able to make it through Gaza’s mostly closed borders for an extended trip to the U.S. She is a mother of two, and until I listened to her share her stories, I honestly did not understand just how bad things were in Gaza. She talked about giving her children contaminated water because she had no other choice. She said they only have 4 to 6 hours of electricity per day, and they never know when it will be. If the electricity comes on in the middle of the night, everyone gets up to do their work. She said, actually, this is not so hard with children because they will wake her up to let her know the electricity is on so they can beg to watch TV. She said it is hard to tell them no because they are deprived of so much. She talked about a bomb that went off in her backyard and another one that went off near her sleeping baby who was protected from the shards and rubble because of the blanket she was wrapped in.

On Friday morning the preacher was the Reverend Jacqui Lewis, who talked about Jesus’ death and resurrection, but who also talked a lot about her own mother who had died two years before. She said she can remember her mother’s first sermon. Jaccqui was taking her first communion at the age of seven. The preacher was talking on and on (wah, wah, wah), but as the plate came down the aisle, Jacqui’s mother leaned over and said to her, “Jack, when you eat this bread, this means God will always love you,” and then a few minutes later Mommy said, “And this cup

means God will never leave you.” And Jacqui said she was sitting there thinking at the age of seven, “She doesn’t just mean God will never leave me. I think she’s trying to say she will never leave me. I will never be left. I drink the juice and I am love with Mommy and I am in love with Daddy and I am in love with God and I am sold on this thing. Nothing else needs to be said. I’m down . . . That’s my first sermon I remember.”

On Saturday I went to a workshop on the Intersections of Liberation: Palestinians and African-Americans. One of the women on the panel was a Palestinian Christian who talked about traveling to Jerusalem for the day of Holy Fire, a high and holy day in the Orthodox tradition that happens the Saturday before Easter when many Orthodox Christians travel to Jerusalem to worship. But when her family arrived, the guards would only let her in because she had a one-year-old child, but they wouldn’t let anyone else from her family go, including the other children. She refused to go without her family, and she said they haven’t attempted to go back since, because she does not want to subject her children to such degrading behavior. One of the speakers, an African-American woman who had traveled to Palestine, showed a photograph of some adorable Palestinian children on the street. She said up above them was netting to catch the trash that people living up above would throw down on them. She told us about the justice minister of Israel who refers to Palestinian children as “little snakes.” Officials in Israel are demonizing Palestinians before they are even old enough to ride a bike. The speaker quoted to us this verse from Matthew 18: “But whoever shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” She pointed out that it is pretty rare to hear Jesus condoning violence. But the one time he talks about throwing someone into the sea, it’s because children are being hurt.

On Sunday morning the preachers spoke about Thomas the disciple and how he said he needed to see Jesus’ wounds in order to believe, and they encouraged us to be people who SEE because it can be so easy not to see. Rev. Sally reminded us that seeing is the beginning of justice. Rev. Elijah reminded us that after Michael Brown was murdered in Ferguson, Missouri by a police officer, Ta-Nehisi Coates began writing a letter to his son in which he said, “Here is what I would like for you to know: In America it is traditional to destroy the black body.” They proclaimed to us that we *must* see . . .

This is an excerpt from Ta-nehisi’s letter to his son:

*I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you. That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up till 11 p.m. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, “I’ve got to go,” and you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn’t hug you, and I didn’t comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.*

*I write you in your 15th year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect . . .”*

If you live in a world and a society where children are not safe or valued, you know something is wrong.

Our worship leader for the week was Claudio Carvelhaes, and he led Bible study on Sunday morning, and he talked mostly about our disconnection from the earth and from animals. He said his favorite Sunday at one church was Earth Day when people were invited to bring their animals to worship for blessings. He laughed and said how noisy it was. The preacher would be saying, “And the Lord said,” and then you would hear, “Woof, woof.” It was messy and noisy and beautiful. His story reminded me of Lincoln Kelley who asks me every single year when we are going to do the blessing of the animals out in the Peace Garden, and I’m sorry to say I’ve usually forgotten all about it.

Claudio also told a story about a time he was preaching and a parent stood up to take their crying child outside, and Claudio said, “No, no, no. Stay.” And then he said to the congregation, “Every time we hear a child make a noise, we are going to say, “Alleluia!” He said it wasn’t a very Pentecostal church, and they said more alleluias that Sunday than they had in ten years.

Wouldn’t that be beautiful if we responded to the noise of a child in worship with an alleluia? That, to me, would feel like church.

Claudio also said something he would really love to do one Sunday when it came time for the children’s sermon is to invite all the adults up front instead. Then, when that mediocre little sermon was over, he’d invite all the adults to get up and leave the room and go elsewhere so that the kids could worship. I loved that.

Did you know that the research on infant brain development shows that being in worship aids a child’s faith development as young as ages 0-3? And yet congregations consistently shuttle kids over to separate rooms and separate spaces so that we grown-ups can enjoy a quieter worship experience—we who are capable of seeking to understand God’s love on our own. We are old enough to be responsible for our own development, our own attention spans, and our own attitudes think that this space is more important for us than it is for children because children are noisy and wiggly and sometimes interrupt our ordered ways of doing things, which, for the record, reminds me a whole lot of the Holy Spirit. I wonder about us when we cannot tolerate interruption. I worry that we may not be able to tolerate the winds of the Spirit either.

Being in sacred community with children is one of the ways children grow their faith, *and* it is one of the ways adults grow ours, because children’s noises and their questions and their imaginations and their freedom to be themselves challenge us and provoke us to be better, more

fully alive human beings open to the flow of God's Spirit and, praise be to God, a little less inhibited by decorum. Children remind us how to live with awe and wonder and joy.

I'm going to be super direct and honest with you right now, even though we're probably all about to get a little uncomfortable. When I overheard that we have people in our congregation complaining about the noise children make in worship, it disturbed me to my core. It disturbed me because I would give anything in the world for my Baby B to be in this room with us making a ruckus. How can we be anything but thankful for the presence of children in this room? It disturbs me that people would complain about the noise of children because this congregation will not survive into the future if it doesn't learn to welcome and embrace young families and young parents just as they are and not as you wish they were. It disturbs me that we are judging how someone parents instead of congratulating them on their hard and holy work and offering a helping hand. It disturbs me because Jesus would never send a child away, not even to the church nursery if the child or the parent wanted that child here. It disturbs me because we have so much to learn from children and if we remove them from our sight, how will we learn? How will we share in their joy and exuberance and energy? It disturbs because church is not about your comfort level or your preferred noise level. Church is about being transformed into the image of Christ and as long as there are children being bombed in Gaza and children are being called snakes in Palestine and children being separated from parents at our borders and black children are being shot by police officers in our country, then why on earth are we bickering about things like a playground or the color of paint on the walls or who changed the way we make the coffee? Y'all that isn't church. First of all, those are first world problems. Second of all, those aren't even problems. They are made-up problems that we use to distract ourselves from being Christian, and it's got to stop. Either the pettiness stops or we stop being a church. Christ did not call us to be a dysfunctional organization or to whine and gripe and call it fellowship. Christ called us to love our neighbor and anything short of that is a false gospel and a royal waste of time.

I was not put on this earth to waste time. I don't know if you've noticed this lately, but people die. We run out of time. And I don't want to die in a meeting or in an argument about the church bathroom tiles. I want to die in the middle of something truly important—like fighting for human rights or caring for my neighbor or reading a book to Leila or laughing with friends.

I am not naive. I know that there is a time and place for meetings and for process and for procedure. But there comes a point when the talk of process and procedure becomes nothing more than a derailing of the movement of God's Spirit and a siphoning of the energy people have to listen and to do God's work. Criticizing "the process" becomes a way to disguise our attack of things and people we do not like so that we do not have to name and own our own biases. It's a passive aggressive way of clogging up progress and running off new people who were interested in investing their time and energy before they got procedured to death.

This is our calling as Lake Shore Baptist Church: love one another. And I am calling us out on our failure to put love first because I do not want to see this church become like so many other churches we have known that hurt people and discard people. Churches rarely do their damage by being overt. You know that, right? They do their damage with secret meetings and with gossip and with rumors and with side conversations and with judgments and with cliques and

with the slow, almost imperceptible movement away from the Spirit and into institutionalism, away from true caring and into rigid traditionalism, away from love and innovation into some concretized form of “this is the way we’ve always done it,” away from a commitment to justice into an obsession with maintenance.

Lake Shore Baptist Church, you are at a super exciting crossroads. You have more new people than you’ve had in a long time. But that means you have to stretch and grow and change and welcome change and welcome people, including their ideas, their children, their parenting styles, their quirks, their questions, and all the ways their notions of doing church are different than yours. You have to learn their names and their children’s names and their passions and what makes them tick. You have to learn how they communicate and what makes them feel loved and known and seen. And of course, the long time members deserve to be loved and known and seen too—that part goes without saying because you’ve been loved here for a very long time, and it is your job to share the love, not hoard it, to multiply that love, to manifest that love, to repeat that love you were given when you first arrived. It is not your job to preserve what has been. It is your job to welcome what will be. Because what has been is a strong foundation that cannot be erased by simple changes and new family members. What has been is with us still and will always be, unless we cease to be church, and then it’s all for naught. So let the rich history of Lake Shore propel us into the future, not bind us to the past with nostalgia. We have to be a church that welcomes, truly welcomes, the new, or we will die. Here is what I am advocating for: Let us choose life. Let us choose children. Let us choose Jesus. Let us choose love. Amen.