

Wheat and Weeds
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, Pentecost V, Year A
17 July 2011
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

A priest was preparing a dying man for his voyage into the great beyond. Whispering firmly, the priest said, "Denounce the devil! Let him know how little you think of his evil!"

The dying man said nothing, so the priest repeated his order. Still the man was silent. Finally, as the dying man was about to expend his last breath, the priest asked, "Why do you refuse to denounce the devil and his evil?"

The man rasped, "Until I know where I'm heading, I don't think I ought to aggravate anybody."

So here we are. As happens once every three years (and not much more often than that), a clear, unequivocal mention of hell appears in the Episcopal lectionary. How I didn't notice that when I was making the summer preaching schedule and assign Erin to preach today, I don't know.

Hell has been much in the news lately, mainly due to the new book written by evangelical mega-church, rock-star pastor Rob Bell, entitled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.

In that book, Rob Bell says he began thinking about hell when his Mars Hill Church hosted an art show on peacemaking. It included a photo of Mahatma Gandhi, and one of Bell's congregants attached a sticky note to the picture that said, "Reality check: Gandhi's in hell."ⁱ

"Really?" thought Bell. *Gandhi's in hell?*

Rob Bell goes on to question whether God would make decisions about salvation based solely upon whether or not one believes that Jesus is the savior of the world. Bell, to the surprise of many, concludes that God wouldn't.

Love Wins has gotten people riled up. Progressive Christians have suddenly hailed Rob Bell as the great hope of the Evangelical movement, mainly because they're excited to see a mega-church pastor who agrees with them. Conservative Christians, on the other hand, have called Bell a heretic and a false prophet who endangers people's souls.

The war over *Love Wins* extends beyond words. A United Methodist pastor in Henderson, North Carolina lost his job when he endorsed Rob Bell's book. (That'll make a preacher think twice!)

It seems that this heated conversation poses to us two questions. The first is, "What do we make of hell?" and the second is, "Who goes there, and who doesn't?"

To the first question, many people find images of hell as a literal underground sulfurous pit full of writhing worms as outlandish as the image of God as a white-bearded old man in the sky. When they can no longer accept that image of *God*, they assume the only option is atheism. And when they can no longer accept the medieval artists' devil-and-pitchfork renderings of hell, they give up the idea of hell altogether and become universalists.ⁱⁱ

But we must recognize that most details about hell are lacking in Scripture. In those passages that *do* explicitly mention it, the Greek word is *Gehenna*, which was an actual and well-known place to Jesus' audience. It referred to the garbage pit outside the southwest corner of the old city of Jerusalem, which was forever smoldering and belching gas. Thus, the prevailing association of sulfur and fire with hell. But even that wasn't *Gehenna's* most awful association. More importantly, *Gehenna* was *outside* the sustaining and protective walls of the city. It was the place where things were cast out, thrown away, forgotten. In our day and age, *that* association still resonates. What, after all, could conceivably be worse than being walled away from all that sustains us: from comfort, from empathy, from love? What could be worse than being utterly, completely alone? That *is* hell. It is why the image Jesus uses today in Matthew of the furnace of fire has never frightened me so much as the complementary image employed elsewhere in Matthew of the outer darkness, cold and lonely, into which some are cast.ⁱⁱⁱ

The best modern image of hell is undoubtedly that of C.S. Lewis in his book *The Great Divorce*, in which the damned move out further and further from all human and godly contact, until they build solitary houses in the far outer darkness with only their own voices echoing off the walls to keep them company, detached and separated from all love.

But if there *is* a hell that is separated from both human and divine comfort, who ends up there and why? Rob Bell focuses his energy on his belief that non-Christians—Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, etc.—have equal access to heaven. Those who agree with him cheer, “Right on!” and those who don't yell, “Blasphemy!” *I* would argue that Bell and those preoccupied with him miss *Jesus'* point entirely.

It is surely true that in John's Gospel Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” as well as “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”^{iv} These are clear statements about the centrality of Christ in God's economy of salvation for the world. They cannot be ignored, and Christians of every ilk must wrestle with them. But we must also acknowledge that in neither instance does Jesus mention hell.

Where and why, then, *is* hell mentioned? The clearest passages in which *Jesus* mentions hell are the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke, the passage about the sheep and goats in the 25th chapter of Matthew, and today's parable about the wheat and the weeds.^v There are commonalities in these three, but in the interest of our time we'll look at today's Gospel.

Who is the focus of today's parable? Is it non-Christians, those who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus or even those who *have* heard the Gospel but rejected it? No: "The kingdom of heaven is like a field sown with good wheat, but while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat...so when the plants came up and bore grain, the weeds appeared as well."

Today Jesus focuses not on non-Christians at all but on *professed* ones. The problem, as Jesus presents it, is that not all who *claim* to know and love him actually do. They may cry his name loudly to the heavens, but their faith is untrue. And the problem is, it's virtually impossible, by listening to their words, to tell the difference.

Not to worry, Jesus says. Let the weeds grow alongside the wheat, lest you injure the good while trying to root out the bad. *God* knows the one from the other, and at the end of time his angels will thresh the field. The wheat will be gathered up and the weeds discarded into the fire.

Jesus' assurance doesn't make us feel much better. If a verbal claim of faith isn't trustworthy, then what determines who is wheat and who is weed? Which are *we*?

To answer this question we have to put this parable in its context. It is part of a much longer conversation of Jesus, one that began earlier in the day when Jesus' mother and siblings came to see him. Jesus used that visit as a teaching moment and said, "Whoever *does the will* of my Father in heaven *is* my brother and sister and mother." In other words, relationship with Jesus is necessarily *active* for the work of God. Otherwise, it's not faith. The bare words of a person—even words claiming belief in Jesus—are no more meaningful than the same words spoken by a parrot. Faith *is* the doing of God's work and God's will. And to put an exclamation point on it, Jesus returns to the idea of his own family at the end of that extended conversation today, saying that "the good seed" who grow into wheat—who *live for* God and don't just claim him—"are the *children* of the kingdom."

It is the same in Luke, when the Rich Man finds himself in hell because in his apathy he neglected the poor man at his feet. It is the same in the parable of the sheep and goats, when the goats—who claim to follow Jesus—find themselves in hell because they failed to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give drink to the thirsty.

This is not earning our salvation. It is rather, that faith *includes* first, foremost, and necessarily the passion to love the things God loves and to give ourselves to the things for which Jesus gave himself. Would it make any sense at all to say we love our children and then withhold all the *actions* that express that love? We'd call such a person sadistic. And when those who *say* they love Jesus do not act tangibly *in love*, they reveal themselves to be weeds among wheat.

I hope it's clear that God doesn't *send* such as these to hell. Rob Bell and I agree that God loves everyone and wants more than anything in the world for those he loves *to love*. But love, by its very nature, does not coerce. God will not force any person to embrace God's own passion for love. If, hiding behind the guise of being an upstanding Christian, one abuses others, takes advantage of others, and compromises others' human dignity, God will, in love, allow that person to walk his *own* way. As C.S. Lewis says, God will say to that person, "*Thy will be done.*"^{vi} And those who choose to define their lives in this way—by evil, hatred, and apathy—cannot ultimately be brought into the presence of God's love any more than shadow can be brought into the presence of light.

In other words, those in hell consign themselves there. They choose, as the greatest human tragedy imaginable, to live apart from the love of human beings and God. By a lifetime of decisions, they separate themselves from light and choose to live in darkness. It's easy to see, then, that hell begins in *this* life, and whatever it may look like in the next life is merely an extension of the hell created here.

Does that hell last forever? Rob Bell hopes not, and I share that hope. Today's Gospel says that, in the end, "all causes of sin" will be burned away. My hope is that the fire of which Jesus speaks metaphorically is a refiner's fire, and that through it even the worst tarnish can melt away and the image of God regain its luster. It is a blessed thought: that eventually, if not in this life than somehow on the other side of the grave, God's love would convince even the darkest soul, cracking through its hardened heart and welcoming it into his enveloping love. That can be our hope.

Where is the good news here? Oh, it abounds! It is good news that God will not, in the end, let hatred and evil have a place in his world. As N.T. Wright says, "One cannot forever whistle 'There's a wideness in God's mercy' in the darkness of Hiroshima, of Auschwitz, of the murder of children and...careless greed ...Not to put too fine a point on it, [but] there will be no barbed wire in [heaven]. And those whose whole being has become dependent upon barbed wire will have no place there either."^{vii}

It is good news—the *best* news—that God is on the side of love and that all we need to do to grow strong and tall as wheat in God’s field is to be on the side of love, too, in our hearts *and* in our actions. No one who yearns to be loved by God and who has passion for the things God loves need ever fear hell. Those who share the passion of our good God will shine like the sun, here and forever in his heavenly kingdom.

Amen.

ⁱ “Pastor Rob Bell: What if Hell Doesn’t Exist?” *TIME Magazine*, April 14, 2011.

ⁱⁱ See N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, pg. 175.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 25:30.

^{iv} John 3:16 and 14:6

^v The most extended passage about hell elsewhere in the New Testament is in the 2nd chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. It agrees in sentiment with the three Gospel passages cited.

^{vi} Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*, pg. 72.

^{vii} Wright, pp. 180 & 179.