

Hell
Matthew 13:24-30 & 36-43, Pentecost 10, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

There are passages of Scripture upon which Episcopal priests love to preach. Today's Gospel is not one of them! Today's passage speaks of wheat and weeds—or “tares,” as is the more traditional rendering. The tares symbolize the “children of the evil one,” and Jesus says at harvest time they will be sifted from the wheat and thrown into the fire where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This image seems far removed from the gentle and embracing Christ whom the Episcopal Church does such a commendable job communicating to the world.

Episcopal priests don't like to preach on passages like this one. But we must. Otherwise we practice buffet Christianity, in which we pick and choose to pay attention to the things in our faith that make us comfortable while ignoring all the rest. In that case, our faith becomes a palliative, a creamy drink on a cold night that warms us inside and helps us to sleep. Faith is, at times, surely that. But it is not only that. Our God of tenderness and love is also a God whose love lays claim to us. Our God is one who requires, for our wholeness and good, that we pursue holiness and give up destructive ways of living. And if we don't, there are consequences. Even Episcopal priests must, on rare occasion, speak of hell.

The prevailing cultural image of hell is colored perhaps by no one so much as Dante, the fourteenth century poet in whose epic poem *The Inferno* is inscribed above the gates of hell, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Within hell, the souls of the sinful are punished, burned in flame, gnawed at by demons and the devil himself. Most importantly, all punishment in hell is punitive. In other words, its purpose is to apply endless suffering as retribution for sin.

This is the idea of hell most of us readily recognize. As a consequence, some of us fear hell as a place to be avoided while others reject the idea as abhorrent, disbelieving that God could ever punish his children in such a place, even as a consequence of their own fault.

What to do with the idea of hell? Well, one group has figured out the answer. Moviemakers in Hollywood have for forty years riffed on Dante's and similar illustrations. Just last week the movie “Hellboy II” was the biggest box office money-maker. But what about the rest of us? What do we do with hell?

In order to consider that question, we need to look with care at today's parable. Most likely, the disciples have come to Jesus with a concern that there are some among them with ulterior motives. There are sinners among the saved, to put it one way. The disciples ask Jesus, “Should we seek to identify the bad seeds and get rid of them? Should we weed them out?”

Jesus knows his disciples are not equipped to discern who among them is wheat and who is weed. So he shares a parable about a farmer whose wheat field is riddled with tares. Tares are a weed that resembles wheat so closely that even a careful eye has trouble telling the difference. On the one hand, if one attempts to pull out the tares, he will invariably pull out much good wheat by mistake, and on the other, many tares themselves will remain unnoticed. Weeding can be destructive when one is not sure of the difference between the good and the bad.

We know this to be true in our context as well. In business, in social settings, and in love we have difficulty discerning who is pure and who operates with only a superficial veil of goodness behind which lies all manner of self-serving motives. And when we do discern, one of the tragedies of life is that we're often wrong. We trust those we shouldn't (often with disastrous consequences), and we accuse those who we later find to have wanted only the best for us. It is difficult for us to separate the wheat from the tares. It is difficult for us to know who to embrace and who to condemn.

Yet the sifting *will* occur, Jesus assures his followers. It will be accomplished at the end of time. Then, there will be no disguise. Those who now hide cruelty behind a mask of kindness will be exposed, and what awaits them is the "furnace of fire."

This should be good news, right? I mean, *we* sit here in the house of God, worshipping Christ on bended knees as his followers. We are surely among the children of the kingdom, destined for light. It is those who wrong us, who pretend to befriend us only to do us harm, who will be cast into darkness.

It *should* be good news, but it doesn't feel that way, because we have a foreboding sense that the intermingling of wheat and weeds is more complicated than that. We know in our lives—I know in my life—that *within each of us* there is good and bad. Even after becoming part of the family of God, we sometimes embrace one another with one arm and stab in the back with the other. We act out of anger, resentment, pettiness, and pride. By God's grace we are *capable* of love, and as we grow in Christ that capacity, we pray, increases by leaps and bounds. But we know that within each and every one of us there is wheat and there is tare. It's not simply a matter of good people and bad people. It is, rather, a matter of the good *and* bad that resides *in me*...and in you.

Well, this makes the notion of hell a bit trickier, doesn't it? Who, exactly, gets cast into the fire? Some solve this conundrum with the language of "once saved, always saved," claiming that a singular conversion experience serves to punch one's ticket at the end of time. On one level, they're right. God's promise of ultimate salvation for those who live in Christ *is*

unwavering. But their solution doesn't do justice, it seems to me, to the complexity of Jesus' parable. Jesus says that, ultimately, *all causes of sin* will be cast into the fire, and even in the lives of those committed to Christ often the causes of sin still prevail.

Our tradition offers us other images of hell that may be helpful. One more ancient and mostly neglected vision is that of the great Church father St. Gregory of Nyssa. For Dante, you'll recall that hell was punitive. It was retribution for sin. Gregory, though, views hell very differently. Just as God's whole plan of salvation intends to restore and reconcile us to God, Gregory says, even hell itself intends to *restore* us.

Gregory agrees that wheat and tare exist in each of us.¹ Even those of us who have opened our lives to Christ continue to live with all the mixed motives I articulated earlier. To describe our lives Gregory uses the image of a precious metal amalgamated with baser ones. We have gold in us, but we are also riddled with rust and lead. Yet, God wants to embrace us fully. His love is pure. God wants so to infuse us with his light and love that the gold in us shines, but the tarnish that is also within us can't abide in God's presence anymore than a shadow can remain when the sun fills its corner. The God who saves us, who claims us as his own, also desires wholeness for us. And wholeness—ultimate and full reconciliation with our brothers and sisters and with our God—*requires* that these things be burned away. Pure love leaves no room for hatred, for pettiness, for selfishness, or for pride. And so, in Gregory's image, hell is that fire which burns away our rust and ruin. He borrows language from the Old Testament prophet Malachi and calls hell a refiner's fire that restores our souls to their original God-given luster.

Hell, then, becomes something far different than the notion we've inherited from Dante. It becomes, paradoxically, a place of hope rather than hopelessness. It becomes not a pit of despair but a tool in God's economy of salvation. It becomes the place where, as Jesus says today, "all causes of sin" are burned away and one comes out on the other side able to live and love purely, able to accept the embrace of the God of love.

For many, the melting away of those dark and destructive parts of us happens in *this* life. But is the experience always one of hell? No. It may occur as gently as snow melts from thawing landscape, as we willingly and through grace give up our old lives. But it may not. I once spoke to a recovering alcoholic whose life previously had been defined by his addiction. He knew when and where *he'd* experienced hell. Drinking itself, he told me, he had *not* experienced as hell. On many levels it was the life he'd have chosen to continue living, leaving an ever longer trail of destruction in his wake. But neither his community nor his God would

¹ This exposition is drawn from Gregory of Nyssa's *Great Catechism*, chapter XXVI.

allow him to remain in such darkness. “*They put me through hell,*” he told me, and he meant it. He experienced hell in the excruciating and painful process of *giving up* alcohol and repairing the relationships he’d so disastrously damaged. Gregory of Nyssa’s idea of hell made perfect sense to him.

The addict is perhaps the extreme example. But there are countless others who experience in this life the excruciating yet purifying refiner’s fire that comes with having burned away by the power of Christ and the community the destructive and harmful things that have defined us: our anger, our resentments, our pettiness, and our pride. It is a passage through hell giving these things up, but on the other side is light.

The reality still remains, as Jesus says, that there will be those who will cling to these things throughout life. At the end of time, then, there will be a reckoning. In other words, Gregory believes that for some hell is a real, metaphysical place. But even then the reason is not vengeance but love. God seeks not retribution but restoration, the removal of those things that separate us from our Creator. And even hell then, hopes Gregory, has at its far side our wholeness and embrace by God.

And so, we actually come full circle. This sermon has been, after all, one of good news. St. Gregory’s vision of hell is only one among many, but it is one I find compelling. For Gregory, the defining characteristic of hell is that it seeks to burn, to dispel from us the destructive parts of who we are and strengthen in us the power of love. Such hell is painful, because it’s always painful to let go of the things by which we’ve defined ourselves, no matter how destructive they may be. But on hell’s other side we find the God of love in whom we can then live fully, who invites us into his kingdom to shine like the sun as children of light. *Amen.*