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Sermon at Closing Service of 2011 ELCIC National Assembly

Rev. Susan Johnson, National Bishop

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Texts: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Pentecost 5 (Lect. 16)

July 17, 2011

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

I don't know how the rest of you are doing, but I confess that I am exhausted. Since we gathered at our opening worship on Thursday afternoon (is it really only three days ago?) we have worked hard through a massive business agenda, experienced together just about the whole gamut of emotions, been nourished and fed by music, prayer, preaching, and the banquet table. We have made some very difficult and gut-wrenching choices for the future of our church and its ministry. Some of us will be leaving this convention elated, and some will, and have already, left despondent.

But all of us have choices to make as we leave this convention and head back to live out being the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada from coast to coast to coast. At the banquet last night, one of the delegates (and I'm sorry that I have forgotten your name) came to me and said: "The image of God in me recognizes and honours the image of God in you." Recognizes and HONOURS the image of God in you. It is a willingness to look for and recognize the sameness we have with each other by virtue of our common creation and common baptism.

In the gospel lesson today a comparison is made between the wheat and the weeds. It is a common response to this text to think that we are wheat. It's a great feeling to think that we are wheat. It feels safe and secure. Yes, we know that there are weeds out there, but we can rest assured that God will take care of them!

Unfortunately, that is not what this parable is about. We may be wheat, but in this parable all the wheat does is sit there and grow. And let's face it, that is not us!

Instead, we are more often like the servants in this parable – quick to run to the master with our reports of weed sightings. Quick to act as self-appointed weed vigilantes. We want to get out the jumbo super-deluxe weed whackers and go to war!

And if we can't kill those weeds, we at least want to contain them. Let's get the wheat to one side and the weeds on the other.

Throughout history, people have used a variety of ways, some mild, some extreme, to separate 'us' from 'them'. We've used the railroad tracks to differentiate those on the right side of town and the wrong side of town. We've put up iron curtains, security fences and

separation walls, we've used ghettos, concentration camps, reservations, homelands, refugee camps, and segregation laws, all as ways of keeping away from "them".

Who's "them"? Why, the weeds of course! And we know who the weeds are. We can separate wheat from weeds, right?

Here is a list of some of the categories that have been used to separate "us" from "them". White and black. Male and female. Gay and straight. Rich and poor. Indigenous and non-indigenous. Young and old. Able and disabled. Thin and fat. Healthy and sick. Conservative and liberal. Christian and those of other faiths.

When you spell it out like that it becomes clear that it is a little more difficult than we first thought. You notice that our understandings of some of those categories have changed over time. And we disagree within our church about some of the categories. Maybe differentiating wheat and weeds is harder than we thought. Or at least it's hard to spell out, to put in words. But still we know – don't we?

Maybe, just like the servants in today's parable, we are not given the job of separating wheat and weeds because we don't have the ability. We can't do it.

Why is that? Why can't we separate the wheat from the weeds? There are a couple of reasons. First of all, if we are really honest with ourselves, we have to acknowledge that we have all been weeds at different times in our lives. Sometimes we have not worked towards bringing in the reign of God in this world. Sometimes we've even worked against it, or at least worked against others who have been trying to do God's work. We have sinned. Hurt others. Done what we knew was wrong. Looked after ourselves and not worried about the consequences to others. Sometimes these things have happened unintentionally, but sometimes they have been deliberate – sin has just got a hold of us and the next thing you know, there we are, acting like weeds!

Secondly, we all know the pain of being treated like "them". We have all felt left out, made fun of, felt out of our league, made to feel like we don't belong, been ignored or hurt. We all have felt judged by other people, made to feel like we are not as good as they are. We know what it is like to have people looking at us saying "we're wheat and you are weeds". It leaves us with a sense of injustice and outrage. And it is very hurtful. And although those experiences may have been brief, or only happened occasionally, if we think about them, and remember the pain of being excluded, we are less likely to begin passing judgement on others.

Today's gospel lesson tells us that we are meant to give up our attempts to act as weed-identifiers. Trying to erect barriers and set up divisions, trying to separate the wheat and weeds, is not the point.

The point, as St. Paul so clearly spells out, is that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.

The point is that Jesus was and is here with the weeds and the wheat. He did not differentiate among those he associated with, among those he loved.

The point is that in the overwhelming love of Jesus, the barriers come down.

So, does this mean we are to be inactive? Of course not. In today's parable we see the owner of the field caring for the crop – both wheat and weeds – watering, fertilizing, making sure that it all grows. And that is what we are to do as well. It's why we are trying to live out our vision of being a church In Mission for Others! It's why we are working to deepen our Spirited Discipleship, strengthen our Effective Partnerships, reach out with Compassionate Justice, open our communities to increasingly Diverse Faces, and practice good stewardship through a Focused Framework.

We are to lavish care on all people, indeed on all creation, just as the owner of the field attends to the whole crop. So let's encourage each other to stop erecting barriers that separate us from them. Let us let the image of God in me recognize and honour the image of God in you. And let's get on with the work of caring for the field – weeds and all! This is my prayer, for myself and for this church. Amen.