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Focal Scripture: Matthew 13

Good morning, beloved siblings in Christ here at Bethesda Lutheran Church,

Life would be so easy if those simple stories were right, the ones which only know good or evil. Most of our movies work like this. You have a world of villains who try to rob a bank, to kill a high-profile person, to undermine the internet. In bad movies, you know from the beginning who they are, those grim-looking people who have nothing in their mind other than doing evil. In better movies it's a riddle through the whole film who the bad guys might be. And in the worst movies, you feel from the beginning, how the moviemaker is trying to cheat you, too obviously depicting the smiling face of the good father and loving husband, so that you must know: This allegedly and seemingly friendly guy must be the rogue.

All these sorts of movies agree, there are good and bad people. And usually there are many more bad than good. However well or badly made the movie is: You want to be on the good side. You won't want to be the culprit, you want to be the one who fights for good against evil, for God against the devil. So it happens in so many movies, letting you the viewer join forces with the good guys. It doesn't happen so

often in life. That is what makes today's gospel so strange, if we can even call it Gospel, this threading [threatening?] and even intimidating text, that basically says: There are some good, they will take it all, and there are some bad who will take nothing, except a trip down to hell.

Yes, I am always on the good side.

In my dreams at least, and hopes.

In real life, it might happen that I overlook the child in need.

In real life, it might happen that I think first of my benefit and then of the others'.

In real life, it might be, that I am not all day supportive to others.

It *might* happen, if I am honest to myself and to those to whom I owe support and honesty.

And maybe, just: *maybe*, one or the other of you might also confess that there are some moral lacks in our life.

We don't like to speak about this. We love more to speak about others' moral lacks. We might even enjoy it, when today's parable talks about those weed people going to hell.

Some people seem only to sit there and to wait for any famous people to make a mistake. You can write long articles then about them and express your outrage in the new media about what he or she has done wrong. It is good that we have open debate about everyone in society, but sometimes it seems like we would expect celebrities to be Saints. They are not. We can read this in the newspaper daily.

We aren't either.

We can read this in our faces when we look into our mirror in the morning.

When watching our face, we might start to brook with ourselves. I haven't done everything right, okay. But I haven't done everything wrong either. I am not a Saint, right. But I am not a criminal, though, let alone a devil. I am something in between, acting well and badly, some days better, some days worse.

This is just how we are.

There seems to be no place for us in this parable of the weeds. We should be wheat, otherwise we are weed – and as we are talking about faults and mistakes: I tell you, it is not easy for a second language speaker to discern these words by pronunciation! 😊 Anyway, the story doesn't care about pronunciation, it is about what we do. Weed or wheat. Good or evil. Hell or heaven. The story doesn't allow for anything in between.

There we are mostly, though. Right in between, right in the middle, not so good, but fortunately not so bad either. If we do not really fit into the story, we might give it another twist. Maybe it is neither right to say we aren't good, nor to say we aren't evil. We are totally good. And we are totally evil.

That seems to make things even stranger, but this brings us to the core of what Martin Luther says about human beings. They are totally good *and* totally bad. Or, as he put it: We are sinner and righteous at once. In fact, when we see, we are not doing enough, we feel ourselves being stuck in sin – which is

an odd word, overused over centuries, and all too often used to intimidate people, telling them: “You are the sinner,” like we see the culprit in the movie. They are wrong, they are to be blamed. But we are to be blamed, too. What this old, maybe even outdated word of sin wants to tell us, is nothing more than: We are always bound to ourselves, in all our doing and feeling.

Who could say that their first thought is about others? Whom do we really know other than through our very own lenses, always relating them to us? We might think of ourselves as social beings, we might even be respected as such by others, yet nevertheless there is no thought in us which we could detach from ourselves. It is our thought, it is our view of the world, always grounded in a kind of selfishness that is stronger than all social feeling. If we say, we are no Saints, we just say this: We are not like those, of whom legends say that they did care more for others than for themselves. We are usually not of this kind, even if we wished to be. Even when loving others, there might be some selfishness in us, that loves the other just to find someone else who takes us as we are, who loves us back. Observing ourselves honestly, we see all the mental as well as physical limits we have which confine us to ourselves. This is why Luther calls us sinners in the deepest sense of sin which means that we love and want ourselves more than others.

Luther doesn't end here, though.

We are sinners, he adds, and we are righteous, and this latter is as totally true as the first is. We are not righteous because we always do the right thing, but we are righteous because God recognizes us as righteous, and accepts us right as we are. This is why Paul can call us children of God. If human beings come close to think more of another than of themselves, it is usually in a caretaking situation, and the most common image for caretaking is the parental one, like Paul uses it here for God our mother and father. What can a child do to lose their mother's love? And if they lose it, is the child wrong or the parent? Family ties might be challenged when a child does something truly wrong, but they won't tear easily. So, will God hold with us. He is the first and he is the last, as we heard from the words of the prophet Isaiah. Everything has begun with him, and we won't finish the course of our life without him. This could be scary: someone always watching us all time, like big brother does in George Orwell's 1984. But God isn't a control freak, he is an overall protector.

So we do not have to fear him, even if this story of the weeds among the wheat might push us to fear. It should not, the story goes different. God is not only not controlling, he isn't pursuing us for all that we have done wrong. He doesn't wait all the time only to throw us into hell. We should not see others as the weeds in this parable, but we shouldn't see ourselves as the weeds either. *[I'm just making "weed" plural because it makes it easier to hear the difference*

*between "wheat" and "weeds"!]* The weeds only remind us of what we would earn if we would be served right for our wrong doing, wrong saying and wrong thinking.

We do not always get what we deserve. We might often find this annoying, but it can also be good, good for us who have deserved bad, but get good. For us, who know we are weeds, but are treated like wheat.

Wheat as we are, we are debtors, as Paul calls us, debtors to God, debtors to our neighbors.

Think of those you should have treated better in the last 12 months, and you will feel how true this is, that we are debtors to many.

The story of the weeds seems to threaten punishment for this, but Paul tells another story: God gives encouragement instead of penalty. There might be students at school or university who you think only learn if they have to face penalties otherwise. Maybe this is how they are, but God trusts we are not of the same kind. He motivates us instead of threatening.

The future as Paul describes it is not about splitting into heaven and hell, it is about bettering our world, and to do so, together with all. The Bible, and the New Testament in particular does not speak very often about how we are interconnected with creation, but nothing could be more important in our times than this is.

Indeed, the creation is sighing with us, and even more, it is sighing from us, from the harm we are doing it for decades,

and centuries even. Again, this could be a chapter in our weed story, pointing us to hell, but instead of splitting the good from the evil, Paul tells a story of solidarity, coming from communality in sighing. The creation is longing for God's salvation. So are we.

And so, quite all of a sudden, we find ourselves in between good and evil, but not in this blurry way of "Is it good enough what I do?", rather, we find ourselves on a journey. The starting point is us being not enough in the view of God, being sinner, being deficient, you name it. The destination is God's glory, in which neither the creation suffers nor do we. This is still far away – we have only to look around to get this. God's glory isn't here, in this world in which every day we hear of war, of people becoming homeless, of the climate getting worse and worse, as if nothing could stop the decline. Far remote as God's glory is, though, it is already here. When Paul speaks of God justifying us, he means exactly what I said before with Luther's words: God is looking at us as being righteous in his eyes. He accepts us as we are, and with this, he sends us into this world which is not good, to make it better every day.

This has to start with us. We should not sit still thinking about whether we are weeds or wheat. We might be weeds, but we are called to become God's wheat. Wheat which is growing, from a small grain to a feeding ear. So can we grow from feeling weedy to becoming fruitful in this world. We are in between both, weed and wheat, good and bad, and the more

we are following the call to improve this world, the more we become wheat out of weed.

If we see the world differently, the world might see us differently. It is a hard challenge, actually, but let's start and take a crack at it: look at the other and see them as what they are according to Paul: God's child. God's beloved child. The one whom we might or even should love as God loves us, the one whom we might or even should love as God loves us, the one who longs with us for the future glory, the one who is on the way with us from what we have done wrong to what God will do right and good. We might still feel our limits, we might still be selfish, but we might try to cross these limits, to come from self-love to the love of the other. Then, together with them, we might go, step by step, towards God's future, in which the question is not about me against you, but in which we come together, as beloved children of God.

On the journey we are still not entirely on the bad side or the good side, but we can work for this world becoming less evil, or maybe even better and better, and so, we help God to make this world, which has ever been his world, also look like what God's world should look like. [*or: we help God make this world, which has ever been his world, begin to look the way God's world should look.*] We can do so, because God empowers us, he sends us, and he lures us toward his goal. Let's follow his call, let's become God's wheat for the future. Amen