

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany • January 31, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 4:31-44

“Being SJLC 2016: Neighboring Everywhere”

Few things can pull neighbors together like an historic snowstorm. The snows that came last Friday and Saturday brought pretty much everything in our area to a halt. Alexandria alone saw 50% more snow in a day and a half than we normally average over the course of an entire year. What that much snow comes that quickly – especially around here – there’s not much you can do to get out and about. When the time comes to leave home (or wherever you got stuck during the storm), you’ve got to dig out. We started shoveling on Saturday morning while the snow was still falling. After a while, we noticed a few of our neighbors coming out and doing the same. The storm gave us a chance to introduce ourselves to people we’d not yet met. Even better, it gave us the chance to help each other clear off driveways and sidewalks, or free cars that had been stuck in snowbanks. It gave us the chance to really be neighbors. From what I have heard over the past several days, many of you had similar experiences.

Here in northern Virginia, it seems like you’re lucky if you get the chance to interact with the people who live closest to you. Most people keep pretty busy schedules that have them away from their homes for work and school and dozens of other activities. When people are home, they often just want to rest. Our apartments and condos and townhomes and houses become retreats from the rest of the world – bunkers, even. That makes getting to know your neighbor that much more of a challenge. What do your neighbors think of you?

If your neighbor were to find out that you were a Christian, what might they think about you, what you believe, and how you live? Would they want to spend more time with you, or less? I could be mistaken here, but it seems like the world at large misunderstands what Christianity is all about. I’ve heard people say that it’s just like other religions, each of which claims truth, even exclusive truth, as its own. They think that Christians talk about moral living and believing in Jesus as the most important things in life; however, there’s nothing distinctive about Christianity that makes it worthwhile. They see Jesus as a moral teacher and nothing more. Would you agree with them?

There are reasons why our neighbors see the Christian faith the way they do. A big part of their misunderstanding stems from the basic fact that the world will continue to reject Christ as the Lord until he comes again. That being said, though, our neighbors’ perception of Christianity probably has more to do with Christians that they see and hear. They look at politicians who claim to be Jesus’ followers, but act in a manner that would indicate otherwise. They hear that you have to believe that Jesus is God’s Son in order to get into heaven, but don’t know what that really has to do with the here-and-now. They see Christians like you and me who are going to worship at church but who are lacking in love towards the people around us as we go from day to day.

The object of the Christian faith is more than teaching about moral living. It’s more than a belief in Jesus as the one who saves us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Yes, Christianity does teach God’s design for living life right. It does point us to Christ as our sole Savior. But the God-given gift of faith also makes that believing and living possible. He brings us from death to life to believe and to live in the experience of a restored relationship with God. Christianity is about living out that restored life with God, into eternity, by His grace.

In our Gospel text today from Luke 4, we heard examples of how Jesus went about his mission to bring the good news of God’s kingdom – his reigning – into our broken world, examples that show just how important human beings (and our day-to-day lives) are to our Creator. The Son of God came down into His creation because you are worth it. You are valued. You are loved. In this season of Epiphany as we celebrate the light of Christ breaking into our dark world, we remember that Jesus entered into human life for all human lives. That includes you.

Jesus took his journey to the cross in order to set the captive free and bring rescue from the kingdom of demonic. As he traveled through the region of Galilee in those early days of his public ministry, Jesus brought God’s love to bear in the lives of those he met. Proclaiming God’s word of grace at the synagogue, teaching the people, he showed them what it meant to live as his Father’s children. Going out into the towns, he could have merely spoken and ended all their sickness and suffering; instead, he gave his healing touch to individuals like Peter’s mother-in-law, like those many who came as the sun was setting. Jesus

didn't just heal them all, he spent time with them. Jesus fulfilled anew God's promise through Jeremiah: "for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD."

There in Galilee, through these first miraculous signs recorded by Luke, Jesus showed that he was not simply a teacher of right-living. He spoke with God's word of authority, rebuking the darkness that had dimmed people's lives, driving it out. Here, today, Jesus still speaks with authority, driving out the darkness that had dimmed our lives as he calls us forgiven and invites us to the feast of food and drink which benefits both body and soul in Holy Communion. Here, today, God is again working through means we can taste and touch to be with us to deliver us. Here, today, God making it possible for us to really be neighbors.

Jesus went about through Galilee showing people that they were loved by God. He neighbored everywhere, delivering God's gifts in love. God still gives gifts to His people, as we heard in today's epistle text from 1 Corinthians (12:31b-13:13), but those gifts are all grounded in love: the love we have from God in Christ. Jesus is still neighboring everywhere, and he wants to neighbor everywhere *through you*.

By this point in our **Being SJLC** focus, I might not need to say that the "SJLC" also means "Serving Jesus + Living in Community." Still, I think it's especially important for us to remember that we Christians serve Jesus primarily in serving our neighbor: the neighbor who is the person next door, the neighbor who is your family member, the neighbor who is your friend or your coworker. As you neighbor locally, use the gifts that God has given you, acting in that love we have from God in Christ. Show your neighbor what it means to be a Christian by loving them.

As a congregation, we're also looking to how we can neighbor globally. One of the ways we're planning on living out that part of our identity as God's people in Christ is through the support of a refugee family, using the gifts God has given us, acting in love towards people who we've never even met. This weekend, you'll hear the story of a member of our congregation who came to the United States as a refugee and was sponsored by St. John's as they began their life in our area. It looks like God is giving us the opportunity to neighbor globally once again.

Snowstorms come and go. Hopefully, this most recent one gave you a chance to connect with your neighbors, to show them God's love. No matter what storms might come in life, God continues to make neighbors. You need only look to the cross to see that Jesus is neighboring everywhere. Trusting God in Christ, you can find the the healing that you need, the sign of how much you are worth to your Creator, and the evidence of His love for all people. Together under the cross by God's grace, we have the chance to really be neighbors.

Amen.