

“THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF J. CHRIST”

A Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, 2016

Text: Luke 10:25-37 (The Good Samaritan)

But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Just for clarification, mind you; so he could be sure to fulfill what God expected of him, because of course he truly desired eternal life, and he knew that he could only have eternal life if he fulfilled the law of God—just to be sure, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

But Jesus was no dummy. He knew that what the man was really asking was, “And who is not my neighbor?”

Because if people are your neighbors, there are implications. You have to love them. If, of course, you want eternal life.

If people are your neighbors, you lend them things. You mow their lawn when they go on vacation. You smile and wave when you see them. You live with them. You chat across the fence.

You don’t freak out when you see them. And you certainly don’t shoot them.

So he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Because he had probably lived his whole life with a working definition of “neighbor” which did not include the sort of people Jesus included in his definition. Jesus acted like all the problem people of society were . . . not only his neighbors, but his friends.

Jesus heard the sinister questions lurking inside the administrative question. Jesus heard him asking “How little can I get away with?” “How much do I have to suffer for others?” “How much love of others is enough?” Jesus heard that loud and clear.

Jesus knew that this man was not the only one with this problem. Loads of people back then (just like now) were friendship cheapskates. They knew who they liked and who they didn’t like. Their neighbors, in their book, were the people they liked. He could see that by the way they interacted. Judeans would stand over here, Galileans would stand together over there, and there was no room for Samaritans. Righteous people would not stand close to or eat meals with unrighteous people. Neighborliness had become a commodity, and people were hoarding it.

So, when the lawyer tested Jesus with the question about their neighbor Jesus could see that he did not really want to be a neighbor to others. Neighbors are close by definition. This guy liked apartness. He planned to suffer only as much closeness to others as the law of God imposed on him, in order to be holy, which means “set apart”—which is the opposite of neighbor, he thought.

When people like that lawyer asked Jesus who their neighbor was, they were really asking how far away God would allow them to stand from people they didn’t like! Being a neighbor, showing love, bringing mercy to bear—these things get you dirty and cost money. That is the hard part about being a good person! They wanted to be good neighbors—but they wanted very large yards.

Jesus knew that merely knowing the commandments would not help this man gain eternal life. Nor would it save the world from lovelessness. So he said, basically, “You want to know who your neighbor is? I am.”

And he told the lawyer his life story. In which there are really only two characters. Jesus and the whole

world. Although Jesus pretended he was somebody else, when he told the story.

In the beginning of Jesus, there was this world of people down on earth which was suffering and dying. The world was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when it fell among robbers, who stripped it, beat it, and left it half dead. The world.

Simultaneously, in the beginning of Jesus, there was this world of people down on earth, a world of robbers. They would all wait for someone to come along their stretch of road between Jerusalem and Jericho, and the world would fall on them and beat them and take what they had, and leave them half dead.

And these two worlds were the same world, all at once. Victims and robbers. Robbers and victims. All mixed up together. And the world was getting worse and worse, beating itself up, robbing itself, leaving itself for dead. Writing books and making movies and singing songs about how sad and angry and wishful and bleak life is, and making itself more and more unhappy. The world, Jesus said in his story, was half dead.

And then, out of the mercy of a strange and disappointed and loving God, Jesus got born into the world. God had created the opposite of that mixed-up world in which people lived by hurting one another and devouring one another. Jesus was born, an alien in the world. Kind of like a Samaritan in Judea, if you think about it. And Jesus grew up and went around on roads. You know, looking for trouble. He was not “looking for himself,” as some put it. Actually, he was looking for the world. And he found trouble. He was on route 66, on his way to Jerusalem, and he found the world. In a ditch. Left for dead. First by robbers—the “bad people” and then by a priest and a Levite—the “good people.” Those were the people—like the lawyer—who wanted to have as few neighbors as possible. They would keep away from people in need. They, too, had left the world for dead.

So Jesus—the Samaritan, as he told the story—was moved with compassion. Went over to the world. Helped the world. Did what he could—bathed the world’s wounds and gave the world a drink and put the world on his own little donkey, not on the back of it but on the saddle. And then Jesus—who, I think, had not been on his way to Jericho but rather to Jerusalem—turned his animal around and took the world where it was trying to go. And he put the world up at a nice enough motel, and after staying one night Jesus ascended into heaven, but not before he had prepaid for the world’s care. Jesus gave his disciples his two cents worth, his two denarii worth: He told his disciples to take care of the world and he would come back. Then he went away.

“You want to know who is your neighbor?” Jesus asked his opponents, the ones who hated him, his enemies: “I’m your neighbor.”

“I have come to you because you need me. You may not realize it, but you need to be saved. Because you are the robber yet you are the victim. If I had not come along just now you would have died. Not from stab wounds. What is killing the world is the world. So I came to save the world. And I’m not done saving you, but when I leave I will leave you in good hands—the hands of my people. Let’s just call them “the church.”

Roughly, that is the autobiography of Jesus. His healing, his teaching, his birth and his death and resurrection and ascension, the price he paid and for whose sake he died and what he was all about—saving the world from the world.

Then Jesus gave a surprise ending to his life story. He said, “Go thou and do likewise.”

Which was a simple way of saying what we have heard many other ways. Jesus invites us to be his body. Be the body of the God whose love and compassion and mercy are forever. Be in me. Let me abide in you.

Every way we divide up the world causes trouble. Racism is only the most flagrant one. "You be them, we'll be us." All the finger pointing, all the discussion of who is good, who is right; all the taking that goes on; all the living for self or selves. Spending our time mending our fences instead of our relationships. Jesus has come with ointment and wine and a donkey. He has in mind an inn where he can put us for the mean while. He's not shouting, he's calling. Asking us to stop thinking that it's all about each of us getting eternal life for ourselves, or about justifying ourselves. He turns that around, so that we may become, like our Lord, not life-takers but life-givers.

The people of God are innkeepers. What do innkeepers do? They treat strangers like neighbors. And the world is our lodger in bandages.

We don't have altar calls at Lutheran churches. The reason is that every week is an altar call. We don't sort saints from sinners, victims from robbers. Here, every one of us comes to the altar. Jesus ministers in our bodies and through our bodies to the whole world so that we can take beyond the red doors the Good News: Humanity went down to Jericho and fell among people, who stripped it and beat it and left it for dead. But a man from heaven happened to come along. When he saw us he had compassion on us. And so must we. Else how can we all be friends?

Amen.

