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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

June 5, 2016

Series: “Life Together with Luke”

Scripture: Luke 7:11-1

Message: “Has Your Heart Gone Out?”

Today we’re continuing in our summer worship series, “Life Together with Luke." We’re using readings from Luke and the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer to help us think about our life together as the church, but also as family, friends, community, and nation.

As we began last week, we talked about humility, having a humble heart like that of Jesus and the centurion as being the starting point for our life together.

This week, as we continue in Luke 7, we find another quality of the heart that is essential in our lives together as community. It is the quality of compassion.

Today’s passage begins with Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd coming one way, and a funeral procession coming the other.

Think of those moments when you’re driving along and you see the hearse and the long procession of cars behind, lights on, funeral flags waving. You pull over out of respect, waiting for it to pass. But what is going on in your mind and heart? Are you wondering just how long this will take? Are you anxious about being late to your next appointment? Or are you humbled at the mystery of life and death? Do you consider the loss that the family will feel?

In Jesus’ day the roads were narrow. There weren’t any cars. Those carrying the funeral bier, the platform that held the casket, were followed by a large crowd.

Jesus must have stopped and cleared the way for the procession. As he waited for this group to pass, he noticed a few details about the situation.

First, the one who was bereaved was alone. Of course there were others from the community around her, friends and neighbors, but no husband, no children. And now she had lost her only son.

This would surely be devastating today. But back then, it would have been even more so. This means that she has lost her support system. There will be no one to care for her. No one to share their home with her. She was not only grieving this terrible loss, but also was at risk of becoming destitute.

Luke tells us that as Jesus witnessed this woman and her grief, “his heart went out to her.” He was filled with compassion. And his compassion moves him to action. He reaches out and touches the coffin of the young man and says, “I say to you, ‘get up.’”

And in that moment the young man sat up, began to talk. And gave him back to his mother.

Everyone was amazed and praised God.

Jesus’ heart went out. I love the way this is phrased. This phrase describes something much more than an emotional response to a situation. There is that, but there is also action here. There is more than just respect paid or words of comfort offered. Instead he saw, he understood deeply, and he was filled with compassion, the kind of compassion that changed him, that connected him with this stranger, that caused him to reach out and to cross the barriers even of death.

His action was radical, for if you touched the dead, you were ritually unclean for a period of time. But Jesus did this so that he could comfort this widow and give her back to her son.

Jesus’ heart moved him to healing action, to do something about this heartbreaking situation.

This is a key part of our life together, that we would be moved by this sort of compassion for one another and then help to bring about healing, to make things right when they are not so.

I love the way this phrase works. It reminds us that we are called in our life together to listen to our heart and respond in compassion and action for good. But it also reminds us that our heart can also ‘go out’ in the opposite way. It can go out as in fail, turn off like a light goes out, or like a heart when it goes in and out of rhythm. When this happens, out life together suffers.

When this happens, we don’t experience compassion for each other that moves us to healing action, but instead we do nothing, or worse, we respond with selfishness, with irritation, with anger, with a judgment against the other that cements our case against compassionate action.

So today I want to invite you to do a heart check. I invite you to think about how you have interacted with others and to ask yourself whether your heart has more often gone out to others like Jesus’ has, or has it gone out more often in a negative way?

And then I want to invite us to think about what we can do to grow a heart of compassion that goes out to others like Jesus’ heart did.

A key element of compassion is slowing down and taking time to notice people and the needs of the world around us. Jesus and the others stopped along the road and it was when he did that his heart went out to this woman.

When we slow down and take a step back in any situation, we gain perspective, we reduce anxiety and pressure, we give our heart the support it needs to go out to others.

Compassion also grows in us when we continue to put our faith in God rather than ourselves or others. We lose compassion when we expect others to be perfect. And we most often expect them to be perfect when we have those same unrealistic standards for ourselves. We live in frustration and disappointment until we put our trust in the only one who is perfect and yet loves us in our imperfections and whose favorite way of being is to create and heal in the midst of chaos.

And this faith grows when we understand grace. We are not perfect, but forgiven, beloved, made to learn and grow. It is the same with the others we share this life together with. Wherever you are today, whoever you are today, good or bad, when others get it or don’t get it, Jesus does. His heart has gone out to you. His compassionate heart has led him to the action of going to the cross for you, for me, for all who we share the life together with.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a companion along the way puts it this way, “When God had mercy on us, when God revealed Jesus Christ to us as our brother, when God won our hearts by God’s own love, our instruction in Christian love began at the same time. When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with one another. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too were made ready to forgive each other. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our love for one another, the less we were living by God’s mercy and love. This God taught us to encounter one another as God has encountered us in Christ.”

Jesus’ heart went out to this woman. It was filled with compassion that led to action. How is your heart today? How is God inviting you to do the same?

Janet Hunt beautifully states that there are some situations where the only proper response is tears. And yet those tears can move us to action. We cannot bring someone back to life like Jesus did, but we can help to comfort, heal, and give back some of what was lost. We can move past what is comfortable and share a moment which is part of the healing of God. We can go to the visitation rather than just send a card. We can talk about the hard stuff with understanding and respect rather than just talking about the weather or sports or avoiding the person altogether. We can be real and let the Holy Spirit guide us rather than pretending and hardening our hearts to the needs of those around us. We can remind someone that they are loved, that our heart goes out to them, and more importantly, Jesus’ heart goes out to them.

So I’ll ask the question again, “Has your heart gone out?” I pray that it has and it will as it is filled with the compassionate action of Jesus Christ.