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First UMC

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Series: “Life Together with Luke”

Message: “Fear of Faith?”

Scripture: Luke 8:26-39

 When we become followers of Jesus, our life together changes. The way we think of others and how we treat them changes. We begin to take on the attitude of love and grace and care for body and soul that Jesus had for all people, especially those who were the most vulnerable, lost, and broken. And we begin to train our eyes and our hearts to see Jesus in others even when they might not be someone we would have cared about before we began to follow Jesus.

 Before Jesus, our life was our own. We functioned independently. But with Jesus, our life is together. As his body, his representatives in the world, we are bound together with one another in his love and we are bound to share his love with all people.

 We find in our life together that we live under the guidance of God’s word. Dietrich Bonhoeffer urges us as Christians to live our “life together under the Word.”

 As we strive to follow Jesus, he says, “Help must come from the outside; and it has come and comes daily and anew in the Word of Jesus Christ, bringing us redemption, righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. But God put this Word into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others. When people are deeply affected by the Word, they tell it to other people. God has willed that we should seek and find God’s living Word in the testimony of other Christians, in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them” (Life Together, pg. 6).

 As we read, hear and study the scripture, we are drawn together into Christ and the story of our salvation. As that happens, there are certain words and themes that are repeated over and over throughout the Old and New Testaments. One of these phrases that is repeated 300 times in the Bible is “Fear not.”

 And perhaps, then, as people of the Word, it is a phrase then that we should repeat regularly to one another as God’s Word.

 It is repeated so often in scripture and we need to say and hear it so often because we are a people who are so often afraid. And when we are afraid, when fear rules the day, we are not at our best. Fear undermines and destroys our life together.

 As fear rises within us, our powers of judgment, decision making, and evaluation decrease. Fear plays on our insecurities and it leads us to irrational responses. Fear can lead to disastrous mistakes in judgment.

 Scott Bader Saye writes about this and reminds us that while heart disease, cancer and stroke are the top killers in the US, our top fears are terrorists, pedophiles, and plane crashes.

 As our fear overcomes us we begin to see enemies among us and enemies lurking rather than seeing brothers and sisters in Christ.

 Fear undermines our life together.

 Faith is the alternative to fear. When we put our faith in God, when we trust in Jesus and the power of the cross, our fear fades and our courage begins to grow. We realize that we are not afraid to be who God has created and called us to be. We are not afraid to risk loving another, for we have been loved perfectly and perfect love casts out all fear.

 Faith gives us the courage to move toward healing, and to trust that with God, that healing is possible.

 Luke wants us to know this sort of faith. He wants us to know that Jesus is of God and represents this power that overcomes fear.

 In our Luke passage for today, Jesus calms the sea. We are reminded that, “even the wind and the waves obey him.”

 And now in our passage for today, we find that even beyond the wind and the waves, the demons obey him.

 Let’s think about this story from the perspective of fear and faith.

 Jesus sets off across the lake to the land of the Gerasenes. Why? We have no idea because it was Gentile territory and no one would ever want to go there, especially any self-respecting rabbi. You know those places? Those neighborhoods? Where you don’t go unless you’re lost and you lock your doors and get out as fast as possible when you end up there? That kind of place.

 Maybe Jesus took them there to help them face their fears and to grow their faith. Fears grow when we don’t face them, when we lock our doors and listen only to others who are also afraid.

 When they get there, their fears are realized. There is a man who is filled with demons—a legion of them—6,000. He is naked. He lives in the cemetery. He has broken out of every restraint they have tried to put on him. And he comes and starts yelling at them: “What do you want with me Jesus, Son of the most high God?”

 To leave this man alone is what Jesus wants them to do. The demons negotiate with Jesus and then end up in a herd of pigs who drown themselves and the demons.

 And then the man is well.

 You would think the people of the town would be happy. Here is this man who has been healed. He is now well.

 But instead, fear grips them: fear of the unknown, fear of that which is out of their control, fear of the power of God in Jesus. So they send him away. They send Jesus away because they are afraid.

 How often do we do this same thing? Jesus draws near to us in others, in new opportunities and situations that stretch us. But it confronts us. It means we might have to change, to go beyond our comfort zones to reach out and embrace someone who is different than us because now we know God is in them too. We might have to own and give Jesus our own demons. But we are afraid, and so we let our fears rule the day and we send faith and Jesus away.

 We can define demons as those thoughts and habits that cause self-destructive behaviors, that convince us there is no way out, that we’re trapped here, that separate us from living life in its fullest way in community. Their goal is to undermine our life together in Christ, that place where faith and healing in the Word of God take place. They operate by fear.

 But Jesus shows us a different way. He shows us the way of faith. He goes to those scariest places, to those we’re most afraid of. And he shows us God’s presence and power to heal. He loves us with a love that casts our fear and draws us into life together.

 And when we step out in faith and live his command to “love one another,” we find that faith heals us, it relieves our fears, and it helps us to share the good news and to be a part of God’s healing of the world.

 Today, where do you need to hear and claim the Word for your life: “Fear not!”

 Today, who do you need to encourage by sharing the Word of faith with them, “Fear not!”

 Will you join me as we say these words of God to each other, “Fear not!”

 In this world that has been overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, may we be people of faith who trust God, who love one another, who “fear not!”