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First UMC

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Series: “Life Together with Luke”

Message: “Living as Neighbors”

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

 This summer we are thinking about our life together, the life we are called to live together as the body of Christ. We are thinking about how, as we grow in our Christian faith and allowing Jesus to live in and through us, that these qualities become a part of who we are and how we choose to live in each relationship and situation that we are involved in.

 As we look to our passage from Luke for today, we find the story of the Good Samaritan and the concluding instruction that we are to live as neighbors. Living as a neighbor to all is a key characteristic of our life together in Jesus Christ.

 This instruction, to live as a neighbor, might sound a little vague. We might want a little more clarification. The expert in the law wants that clarification too.

 The passage begins with a question the expert acts Jesus about eternal life. Now he’s the expert, so he knows the answer about loving God and neighbor, we call it the greatest commandment. Jesus says, of course, “Do this, and you will live.”

 But the expert has spent years trying to live this out. He realizes how many times he’s run into questions around situations around how to really do this. He wants to make sure he’s doing everything correctly.

 So he asks the question of Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”

 In other words, “Who exactly do I have to love? How far reaching is this law?”

 Jesus, wisely, doesn’t answer directly, but with this story that we all know so well.

 It’s a surprising story about those who you would expect to do good failing to do so, and those you wouldn’t expect to do so, doing good. It would have been shocking to the teacher and the crowd that anyone would say bad things about a priest or a Levite, and even more shocking that anyone would suggest something good about a Samaritan.

 But Jesus loves to turn our ways of thinking upside down and remind us that God’s Kingdom is very different than the Kingdoms of the world.

 After Jesus has sufficiently shocked and upset them all with this story, he reframes the question for the expert in the law: “Which one was the neighbor?”

 Notice that the lawyer can’t even bring himself to say the word Samaritan. The word is too terrible to even say. That’s how much hatred and stereotype existed at the time. He can only choke out the words, “the one who showed mercy.”

 Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

 Go and be a neighbor. Go and show mercy to all.

 I love the way that Jesus takes the question that the lawyer asks and flips it from “who is my neighbor?” to “who was the neighbor?”

 When we focus on the question, “Who is my neighbor?” we’ve shifted the focus off of ourselves and on to others. We’re calculating, “How many of these people I share the world with do I have to treat with respect, care and kindness?” We’re asking “How do I divide them into who is worthy of this treatment and who is not?” The very question assumes that there would be some who we would not treat as neighbor.

 When we think in this way, we taking it on ourselves to judge who is worthy of being our neighbor, who is worthy of our care, compassion, and generosity. It becomes our choice.

 But when Jesus asks the question, he shifts the focus to us. He is not talking about a set of laws, but a way of being. He is asking us who we are deep within. He is asking how we see the world and how the gift of eternal life defines all of our choices.

 Do we want to be like the men who feel they can make the choice to be a neighbor based on their schedule or their level of discomfort or fear or hassle or the worthiness of the neighbor? We don’t know why they passed by on the other side. But we know they were good men who found some set of reasons to justify why they didn’t need to be a neighbor in that situation.

 Or do we want to be like the Samaritan who simply acted with mercy, despite the various challenges and differences that existed between them? Despite the fact that on an ordinary day the man that he helped would have probably looked down on him because he was a Samaritan?

 You see, it doesn’t really matter if you’re a priest. If you don’t love your neighbor by showing mercy, you’re far from eternal life.

 It doesn’t matter if you’re an expert in knowing and following all of the rules in the Bible. If you don’t love your neighbor by showing mercy, you’ve missed the point of it all.

 It doesn’t matter if you’re a Samaritan. It doesn’t matter if others look down on you for whatever reason. If you love your neighbor by showing mercy to them, you are close to eternal life.

 When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, eternal life begins now. The ways of God’s Kingdom of heaven begin to grow in us and we are committed to living them out even when we are living in a place that often seems far from heaven.

 As eternal life grow in us, we become a neighbor to all, showing God’s mercy to all. We do this because this is what God has done for us in Jesus. He has come as a neighbor to each of us, whatever our situation, whatever the state of our heart or mind, and he has shown us mercy. He has and will help us from a place of brokenness and sin and pain to a place of wholeness and peace.

 Did you notice who Jesus is in this parable? He is the most unlikely character, the Samaritan. He is the one no one would want as a neighbor.

 David Lose writes, “Jesus chooses a Samaritan to act like he would act in the parable…Jesus identifies one as rejected by his audiences to demonstrate God’s action in the world…When we fail to see, draw near, and help those we mistrust or fear, or just want to ignore, we risk missing the saving presence of God in our lives and in the world.”

 So the challenge for us today and in our life together relates to our eternal life: Will we choose to be a neighbor to all in the way that Jesus has been to us? Will we show mercy?

 Will we be willing to see the needs around us, both the individual and the systemic needs around us, not through our own apathy or prejudice, not through the hype of politics or the media, but as God sees them? And rather than remaining detached and disinterested, so wrapped up in our own stuff, will we be willing to be drawn into it with the same sort of care that God offer us?

 Will we be willing to leave our place of comfort, the way we’ve always done things, the way we’ve always thought about things, to cross the road to draw near to those who desperately need a neighbor who will show them mercy?

 And will we then respond in compassion, being a part of God’s plan for all to experience healing and peace.

 I invite you today to make the commitment to live as a neighbor, a good neighbor, one who shows mercy and grace to all, all, because God in Jesus has been a neighbor to us. May we choose each day in our life together to be like him and to invite him to live in and through us.