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First UMC

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Series: “Life Together with Luke”

Message: “A Willing Welcome?”

Scripture: Luke 9:46-62

This summer we are looking to the gospel of Luke and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to help us think about how we are to live our life together as Christians. As we follow Jesus, the way we approach our life together changes.

Our passage from Luke’s gospel today invites us to think about our welcome. The way we are willing to welcome others is a key dimension of our life together in Jesus Christ.

We have a dog, Ginger. She’s a great dog, loving, friendly and funny to us. And she is the same to others we have welcomed into our home. We see this side of her so often that it surprises us when she turns into super watch dog when anyone comes to the door, or even when our neighbors, who she likes a lot, are in their yard. But she’s a rescue dog and she has some quirks from her past that are pretty ingrained in her. So we keep working on her welcome.

And maybe we’re all like that. When we’re with our people, we’re welcoming, loving, friendly, and even funny. But when others start to get a little close to our yard, or our front door, whatever that might stand for, our welcome changes and we realize that we might need to work on it because our welcome impacts our life together.

As Christians, we know that Jesus has welcomed us all into his love and grace, even when we have wandered far off from his will and way, even when we don’t look or act or think like good church people. He welcomes us into his life and then challenges us to welcome others into this life of love and grace.

Often we have trouble with our welcome of others when our minds and hearts are full of other things. Sometimes it is fear. We talked about that last week. Sometimes it is our pride which makes us so competitive and willing to push others down and away. This was the case for the disciples. As we find them in our reading today, they are busy trying to figure out which one of them is the greatest…which one is Jesus’ favorite, which one is the best at drawing in a crowd, at praying, at healing people, at teaching.

Our hearts and minds fill up quickly with these sort of things. We see people and rather than welcome them, we compare ourselves with them…our jobs, our cars, our houses, our families, our looks.

Jesus knew that this is what the disciples were spending their time thinking about. They were focused inwardly, on their own group, and competitively. They were missing the people around them who just wanted their acknowledgement, their encouragement, their care.

So Jesus stopped them and said, “If you really want to welcome me, then you will have to change your focus. You’re going to have to stop thinking so much about yourself and who is the greatest and begin to think about who is the lease among you. And if you learn to see them and welcome them into this life together in God, you will have figured out how to welcome me.

As he did this, he pointed out a little child. In those days children were not given the attention, nurture, or empowerment they have today. They were without resources, without power or privilege. And he said, “When you welcome a little child, you welcome me.” Jesus reiterates this in Matthew 25 when he says, “Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.” This includes the orphan, the widow, the poor, the sick, the hungry, those of differing abilities, and different worldviews.

We could really say that Jesus is pushing us to learn how to welcome anyone outside of whatever we consider normal, appropriate, or hassle free. So who Jesus pushes us to welcome might be different for each of us. We all have those we like to welcome. We all have our people and our moments when we don’t want to be welcoming.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when we Christian begin to practice disciplines around welcome, then they “will be able to stop constantly keeping an eye on others, judging them, condemning them, and putting them in their places and thus doing violence to them. They can now allow other Christians to live freely, just as God has brought them face to face with each other. The view of such persons expands and, to their amazement, they recognize for the first time the richness of God’s creative glory shining over their brothers and sisters. God did not make others as I would have made them. God did not give them to me so that I could dominate and control them but so that I might find the Creator by means of them.”

So we like the disciples are challenged to welcome all people, especially the least of these.

We get that, right, even though it is hard. But Luke doesn’t let up on the topic. The story continues and while the disciples might have gotten this point, they still have a lot to learn about welcome because it also means we welcome the best of these. They jump right into their next topic which is about other groups that they told to stop casting out demons in Jesus name.

And while they aren’t talking about which one of them is best, they are still being competitive. It’s not them against each other, but now it’s them against other groups who are casting out demons in Jesus’ name.

But Jesus says, don’t stop them. If they’re not against us, they are for us. If they are doing the same work, making our work easier, helping us get to our goal, don’t stop them.

Sometimes we do that with other Christians. They don’t fit with our vision of how things should be done so our competitive nature kicks in and we want to criticize them, undermine them, stop them. But Jesus reminds us that if we’re doing the same work, if we’re called to the same goals of freeing people to live a full and abundant life in God’s love, then we should be happy.

This goal of welcome in our life together isn’t just to have more friends or to be the most popular church, it is to draw people into our life together in Jesus so that we might help them to connect to the power that can free them from the demons that block life. Today we call those demons apathy, hopelessness, addiction, anger and rage, cruelty, arrogance, poor health, lack of resources.

Our welcome means that we work together to help free people of these demons.

It’s hard though. We learn and then we forget. We need reminders. We have a hard time changing our ways of thinking.

In the third section of our passage, Jesus and the disciples begin to head to Jerusalem so that Jesus can do the work of the cross. The disciples go ahead of him into a village to get things ready.

It was a Samaritan village. I can picture them, thinking they’re doing well. They have never liked Samaritans, but Jesus has taught them a lot about welcoming others. So they walk into town with smiles on their faces, not judging, friendly.

And they get doors slammed in their faces.

And it made them madder than they had ever been at the Samaritans. It brought up every stereotype and unwelcoming thought that they had ever had toward them. This confirmed it.

So they went to Jesus and said, “Do you want us to call down fire and destroy them? Please?”

When we think we’re welcoming people, especially when we go out of our way to welcome others, this weird thing happens and we get really mad. We’re ready to destroy and to reinforce stereotypes, to fuel the fire rather than take it on a case by case basis, to try to understand and try it again.

Jesus doesn’t just say no, he rebukes them. Just because they make you mad and don’t welcome you doesn’t mean that you can do the wrong thing and undermine your welcome. What would that do to your witness? To our message?

Even when others don’t welcome you, do the right thing. Live with a sense of welcome and peace to all anyway.

Jesus led them to the next village where they were welcomed. And we don’t know for sure, but I’d like to think it was a Samaritan village as well.

Our welcome makes a difference in our witness. The welcome we are called to in our life together in Christ goes beyond good manners, beyond our circle of comfort, beyond our pride and competitiveness, and beyond our own effort and feelings in the matter. It is the welcome of Christ that flows through us and draws others in so that they might know the gift of healing, of grace, and the blessing of Christian community.

May we be those who welcome each other, and strangers, and even enemies with welcome of Jesus Christ.