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First UMC

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Worship Series: “Hand Free, Hearts Open, God First”

Message: “Under Pressure”

Scripture: Luke 9:18-36

 Today we’re thinking about the pressures of life. Are you under pressure? You might be under pressure today if you’re a coach or a quarterback for the Panthers or the Broncos. You might be under pressure if you’re hosting a Super Bowl party later today. You might be feeling pressure about your work or how you look or about your grades or a test that is coming up.

 Too often in life pressure leads to stress. And stress causes all sorts of problems. Stress fills our hands and causes us to close our heart to others and to God. Stress is really good at finding our weakest point and showing up there, exposing the places where we are the weakest and most vulnerable. It could be our relationships, it could be our coping skills, our physical health or our faith.

 When we get to this point, we tend to blame the pressure in our lives. We get into all or nothing thinking and we give up on the things that cause us pressure completely.

 But pressure isn’t always a bad thing. And pressure and stress are not one in the same. Pressure can cause stress and stress is destructive. But pressure can also be good, even transformative.

 Pressure is a part of life. Pressure can let us know that this is important. This does matter. This does make a difference. There is a good sort of pressure that you feel to be a good parent. There is a good sort of pressure that reminds you that the way you do your job affects people’s lives and makes a difference in our community. There is a good sort of pressure that comes from your faith, realizing that we are called to represent Jesus in our words and actions and help to transform the world for God.

 My cross country coach in high school used to say it was good to be a little nervous, to feel that pressure. It we were, we’d have that little adrenaline rush and do our best. If we weren’t worried at all, we’d be too comfortable. We might treat it like a warm up jog.

 So there are two kinds of pressure. Pressure that is healthy can help us to grow. It can lead to transformation. It can help us to grow closer to God and to more effectively live out God’s Kingdom.

Pressure that is not healthy can lead to stress and cause us to crack. It can separate us from God and others.

 Perhaps you read the sermon title and began to do the same, but as I was preparing for this message, I couldn’t keep the song “Under Pressure” from running through my head. You know the tune… But I have to admit that I’m a cultural music fan rather than a serious one so I only really know that part. I didn’t know any of the rest of the words.

 So I wondered what they had to say about being “Under Pressure.” You never know where you’ll find a good sermon illustration. So I looked them up. And I found more than just a sermon illustration, I found the gospel. Now I can’t say that a serious Queen fan would like my interpretation, but that’s the nice thing about art—it leaves plenty of room for multiple interpretations.

 As I listened to the song, I heard this separation, that there are two types of pressure. The first kind, the unhealthy, stress inducing kind causes all sorts of problems. That’s how the song starts. Let’s listen.

 But then, as the song goes on, there is a different kind of pressure that he begins to understand. It’s the pressure of love, that dares us to care for each other, that pushes us to reach out and to care for each other, and especially those on the edges, the poor and the isolated and those who don’t fit in. And it dares us to begin to care for ourselves—to take the negative kind of pressure off. Let’s listen again…

 Isn’t that a beautiful picture of God’s grace in our world and in our lives? The destructive pressures of the world pressing in on us and yet God’s Spirit of love pressing back, giving us another chance, teaching us a better way of dealing with the pressures in life, caring for ourselves and others and especially the most vulnerable in society.

 So as we feel both sorts of pressure, how do we understand and deal with them in a healthy way so that we can be part of God’s movement to transform the world in love rather than giving in to the pressure, shutting down internally and externally under the destructive power of stress?

 It’s always good to look to the scriptures for help in answering these sorts of questions.

 Our scripture begins with a moment of pressure. The disciples have been called by Jesus, they have heard Jesus teaching, they have witnessed his amazing miracles, they have been sent out to do ministry.

 But, they are still a little hesitant to clearly say who Jesus is. There is lots of speculation. Jesus asks, “Who do they say that I am?”

 They answer, “Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some a prophet.”

 “But who do you say that I am?” he asks. The pressure is on, the Jeopardy music is playing.

 He could have stayed with the crowd, speculating. But the pressure caused Peter to step up, to speak up with bold faith, “You are the Christ, of God.”

 This is a turning point in the gospels and in Peter’s faith. Often it takes a little pressure for us to step out in faith. But when we do, it opens all sorts of opportunities for God to work and sends out waves of pressure that encourage us and others to love.

 This truth then gives Jesus the opportunity to tell them about what this means. It means that the world will exert that negative pressure on him. He will suffer and be killed. But, the opposing pressure of love will be even stronger and will prevail as he is raised from the dead.

 And then he invites them and us to do the same—to deny self, take up the cross, and follow.

 And this is the point at which we learn how to sort out the pressures of life. This is how we decide which pressures transform and which crush and destroy.

 At each point of feeling that pressure, we ask, is this pressure from the cross—something that love is calling me to do—something that is more than just my desire to achieve, more than someone else’s pressure for me to be, more than the pressure of the world? Jesus says, what good is it to give into that sort of pressure. You might save your life or gain the world from that kind of pressure, but you will lose your soul. But when the pressure is from the cross, from unconditional and sacrificial love that sees beyond self and works to bring about good news, hope and salvation for all, it is a pressure that is transformational.

 Sometimes we need time and space to discern the answer to this question. I think the disciples needed it. After a week of this pressure, trying to figure out what it all meant and what they should do about it, Jesus gave them that time and space. He took them on a mountain retreat to pray.

 Getting away from the stress and the pressure, going to a place where there are not as many distractions where we can think and listen and pray can make all the difference in figuring out the pressures in our life and helping us to deal with stress. When we have that time to step back, we can examine our expectations and ask, where is this pressure coming from? Is it healthy? Is it for a greater good?

 We can then prioritize according to our purpose. We give priority to the places where love is putting pressure on us. We disengage from the places where the world and we ourselves are putting stressful pressure on ourselves that isn’t in the interest of the greater love of the cross. So many things we put pressure on ourselves for aren’t bad things, but they don’t have an impact for the greater Kingdom good.

 As they took this time away, as they looked, they saw more clearly who Jesus was. Before their eyes he was transfigured. He was all light from God, simply clothed in human flesh. And as they listened more closely, they heard from God who Jesus was, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to him.”

 And so, as we experience pressure and stress in life, may we take time to step back and pray, to see Jesus and his cross clearly, to listen to his guidance for our life and then to respond to that pressure of love that presses us to take up our cross and follow him, and then to share that love with our families, with those like us and those different than us, with the poor, the lonely, the outcast.

 We seek to have our hands free so that we can take up the cross, our hearts open so that we can follow faithfully, giving God and God’s Kingdom priority in our lives.