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First UMC

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May 29, 2016

Series: “Life Together with Luke”

Message: “A Humble Heart”

Scripture: Luke 7:1-10

 It’s Memorial Day weekend. What an important time to remember those who have served our country and who have given so much for us.

 Memorial Day also marks a cultural transition to summer and so this weekend we begin our summer worship series, “Life Together with Luke.”

 The series is titled “Life Together” because we will be thinking about just that, about the gift of the church and how we experience faith and the challenges of growing in who we are and how we live our faith when we are in community together. It is not always easy to live life together, especially when we disagree strongly over various issues. But, when we choose to continue to share in life together regardless of our differences, it is a true gift. Dietrich Bonhoeffer will be a guide for us as we think more deeply about this subject. In his work titled “Life Together” he writes, “It is easily forgotten that the community of Christians is a gift of grace from the Kingdom of God, a gift that can be taken from us any day…Therefore, let those who until now have had the privilege of living a Christian life together with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of their hearts. Let them thank God on their knees and realize: it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today.”

 The truths we talk about will also speak to our life together as families, as community, and as a nation.

 The Luke portion of the series title comes from the fact that we will use Luke’s gospel, his stories of Jesus’ life and teaching, as our guide for sharing life together. Luke saw Jesus as one who came and invited everyone into the Kingdom of God. He invited those who would have been enemies, who would have avoided certain people to sit and eat together, to reach across lines of culture and religious rules, and to live together and help each other and forgive each other.

 We see this theme vividly in today’s passage from Luke 7.

 Let’s set the scene by thinking of the way things were. Israel was under occupation by the Roman Empire. The Romans allowed them freedom of religion and protection from other enemies. There was stability, but it was fragile. The Romans were often cruel and callous. Just below the surface of the Jewish people was anger and resentment that would occasionally boil to the surface in an uprising. Rome came down on these harshly.

 That is the role of the centurion. He is there in Israel on behalf of Rome, to keep everyone under control. He is not Jewish. He is a military man who oversees about 100 soldiers who are the eyes, ears and hands of the Roman Empire.

 If we just look at him on the surface, we would consider this centurion an outsider, as one who represents the enemy.

 As the story begins, we find this centurion has a servant who is sick, to the point of death. And there is this little detail that is shared, which pushes us to begin to care about the enemy. This is a servant that he values highly.

 This detail makes us think. Here is someone who cares deeply about the people around him, even his servants. He doesn’t see this servant as expendable and replaceable, but he cares about him and values him deeply. He depends on him.

 As this centurion goes about trying to help his servant, we find out that this attitude of care is not just true in his own household, but he extends it to those who live around him as well.

 We find he is friends with the Jewish leaders and so he asks them to speak to Jesus for him. He could have forced them. He had the authority and the power from Rome.

 But he didn’t need to. What he had with them was more powerful. He treated them with respect, as neighbors. He was interested in their faith and even helped build their synagogue. And because of this, they went to Jesus on his behalf. This is what they said about him: “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.”

 What an amazing tribute. Can you imagine someone saying that about their enemy occupier?

 We have learned that this man cares deeply about his servants, and about his neighbors, and then we find that he also cares for Jesus.

 Jesus says yes and agrees to heal this man’s servant. He is on his way to heal this servant. He agrees to cross boundaries of country, of ethnicity, of faith, and to do so regardless of the fallout. Because people would talk. Why would he heal a Gentile’s servant? He should take care of his own first. He would be considered unclean for interacting with them for a period of time.

 But before Jesus could arrive, the centurion realized all of this. And, as he thought about his own power and authority and thought about Jesus and his authority and power in this situation, it dawned on him. So he sent a servant in a radical act of faith, respect, and humility, to say, “You don’t need to come, ‘but just say the word and my servant will be healed.’”

 Jesus was amazed. He responded, “I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” And the servant in that moment was healed.

 It was a humble heart in both the centurion and Jesus that made the difference. Often, when we hear the word humble or humility, we think of someone who gets walked all over or humiliated.

 But we certainly wouldn’t describe these men in this way. They both have power and authority. And they both choose to use it in ways that bring life and blessing to others rather than to take it for themselves and harm others. They are both willing to cross barriers of religion and class and social expectations to bring about life and blessing.

 So for our topic of Life Together, we witness that the beginning of life together comes from having a humble heart like Jesus and like the centurion.

 To have a humble heart means that we too will be willing to see enemies as neighbors and to build relationships with those who are different than we are.

 To have a humble heart means that we are willing to listen to the requests of others with openness and compassion rather than close minded harsh judgment.

 To have a humble heart means that we understand and share our gifts, knowing that others have different gifts from God. We respect and value them. Jesus and the centurion respect and appreciate each other despite their differences. And they don’t have to agree on everything before they do so.

 The challenge and invitation to us is to do the same—to cultivate a humble heart so that whether it is with family, friends, colleagues or enemies, we will be willing to reach out across differences, to listen and to show respect to others.

 Jeannine Brown summarizes it like this” Maybe we should not be surprised by the unlikely places faith shows up in our own world. It could even show up in those we think are our enemies.”

 General Conference just finished and there were lots of strong and diverse points of view that were presented. But it was a commitment to humility that allowed the church to work through these and to stay together. Our bishop did an excellent job of setting the tone for the conference as he gave the opening address.

 And so I want to close this message today with his words on the importance of humility in our life together. (Youtube video clip from Episcopal Address 2016 General Conference, minutes 5:05-7:22)