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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

July 24, 2016

Series: “Life Together with Luke”

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7, Luke 12:13-21

Message: “The Best Gifts”

 So today we have our summer series, “Life Together with Luke,” meets Christmas in July, meets my last Sunday to preach here as your pastor. That’s a lot to try to fit into the next few minutes. But that sounds like my kind of challenge, so let’s try it. Let’s begin with Christmas in July, and use it as the base to tie everything else into.

 Christmas in July is one of my favorite weekends. It’s nice to hear the Christmas music sung with a fresh ear, when you haven’t already heard it played 25 times in two hours on the radio that day.

 It’s also different to hear the Christmas story read from the Scripture without all of the layers of cooking and decorating and shopping and wrapping that often overshadow the simple power of this story. We have the opportunity to focus on the story alone and reflect on the magnitude of its meaning.

 We can listen closely and hear more clearly the amazing news of God sending the gift of his son, Jesus, to be with us in a tangible, human, flesh and blood way. Jesus, the one called Emmanuel, which means, God with us.

 In the midst of ordinary life, in the midst of the good days or bad, this story reminds us that in Jesus, God is with us. In the midst of days of peace and days of change and new direction, God is with us. This is not just true in a past historical way, but in a right now in the present way. In the midst of our time and space, our experiences, our ability to understand, the word of God took on flesh and dwelt among us. In the midst of our time and space, our experiences, our way of understanding, the Word of God took on flesh and dwelt among us. In Jesus Christ, God is with us.

 And it is good to hear this news when it is not Christmas. It reminds us that this is true each and every day, even when it is not Christmas.

 What a gift to cling to in this time of transition. What a gift for our life together. God is with us in Jesus Christ. Here. Now. Always.

 We don’t have to wait until everything is perfect in our lives or in the world for him to be with us. If that was the case, we might be waiting a long time. But because God is with us even in the hardest moments of the hardest days, we can trust in God, not be afraid, and say with confidence, that “all is well,” because God is with us.

 God’s gift to us that we celebrate at Christmas is the gift of his presence with us. And as we think of the best gifts we’ve been given in life, we will most often agree that they are not material gifts, but the gift of someone’s self. They are gifts that are not material, but spiritual.

 And when we give and receive these sort of gifts, love, laughter, time, encouragement, service, they strengthen the bond with have in our life together.

 It is a key part of our life together that we know and remind each other, and celebrate that God is with us, and that we understand God’s presence is working in and through us even as we are present to and share our gifts with others.

 It makes so much sense. It is such a simple concept. And yet, we often struggle with it. We often think most about the material gifts we give each other. But what they and we truly desire is the spiritual gift of relationship and presence that is behind that material gift.

 For whatever reason, the material gifts often seem easier to give. Christmas is the height of that. You can make a list. You can buy it, wrap it, send it, and check it off the list. Our advertising culture has taught us how to do this so well.

 And we have good intentions. There are places where the material is an important sign of and can complement the spiritual. But the spiritual gifts go far beyond where the material can go, and that is harder territory. It takes more intention. It takes more spiritual and emotional commitment.

 This is what our faith teaches us and we see in the gift of Emmanuel, God with us. It teaches us to give that which will last, to share the gift of ourselves, our presence and our spiritual gifts with each other, and to value people and relationships and faith as far more important than our possessions.

 Our Luke 12 passage talks about this. Jesus warns us against the greed that has divided a family. He says, “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life is not in the abundance of possessions.” And he tells this parable about the problem of material things. They take the time and energy that we’d otherwise use on relationships and community and spiritual things.

 We know this is true because we’ve been packing for weeks. A small amount of our stuff is essential, some of it is helpful, and a lot of it is just extra.

 And so a way to strengthen our life together, is to reduce our investment in the material, to reduce our dependence on the material so that we are free to invest that time and energy into the things that will last. This parable invites us to do so at more than a surface level, but to really think about how much time we put into earning money to pay for our stuff and how that affects our relationships, and how much time and energy we put into maintaining our stuff and how that affects our relationships.

 When we invest in the spiritual and relational first, the material follows. We find a new sense of freedom and a security that is eternal, that lasts.

 And I want to share the ways that I have found this to be true while I have been here at Springboro First UMC as your pastor. You have given me many gifts while I have been here over the last nine years. Some of them have been material. Those I treasure because of the spiritual and relational reality that they represent.

 But even more of the gifts you have given me have been spiritual and relational. They have no price tag. You can’t buy them. They are invaluable.

 You have given the gift of welcome to me and to many family. You have welcomed us into this church and community as pastor and as friends. And it has blessed me so much to see you offer this gift not only to us, but also to the new friends who came through the doors over the last nine years. They did not remain strangers long, but quickly became friends in faith. Thank you for the gift of welcome to us and to others.

 As a part of the gift of welcome and friendship, you have given us the gift of care. You have comforted us and prayed for us on our hardest days and you have celebrated with us on our happiest days. You have been there checking in during the ordinary times. And I have had the privilege of observing how you do this for each other. Thank you.

 You have given the gift of your time to this church and to our community. You have shown up for worship and Bible study and fellowship and service. And those in the community know our church because we show up to help, whether it is in the schools or the food pantries or other organizations. Your time is a precious gift. But as you share it, those relationships of welcome and care grow. What a precious gift. Thank you.

 You have given the gift of your trust. You have shared your joys and sorrows and struggles in life and faith with me. You have trusted me to offer a word of faith, hope, and love in the midst of those times. What a privilege. Thank you.

 You have been open to receiving the spiritual gifts God has given me: preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and nurturing spiritual gifts. Because of your openness, I have grown in my skills and gifts in these areas. And you have been willing to share your gifts with me and this congregation. And because of that, we have all been able to grow. You have shared your gifts of leadership, of compassion, of hospitality, of music, of teaching, the list goes on. Thank you.

 And over these last few weeks, you have shared the gift of saying goodbye well. Even on short notice and in those moments when I have had no words, your words, your kindness and encouragement, your cards and gifts have been such a blessing, filled with God’s grace and love. Thank you.

 Your gift of saying goodbye well will help me to say hello well in my new assignment at the district level. And this gift has also given me great comfort for I know it will then help you to say hello well to Pastor Amy. I have great confidence that together you will continue to draw others into the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ in your life together.

 And as our journeys separate, we will continue to be connected in our life together because we know the one who is with us always, the one who binds us together in love, the source of all of these gifts, Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God.