God’s mercy is deeper than we first recognize. Divine love is more than we initially expect.

We go deeper and we learn more in community.

Community is hard. But it can be so, so good.

Last Tuesday night, our confirmation class joined our session for dinner. They are young men and women in their early and mid-teens. We on the session are older. They are digital natives. Some of us struggle with technology. They are young and hip and cool, and we . . . . well, we are not nearly so young and hip and cool.

To be honest, I expect the confirmands were nervous on Tuesday evening. It’s not easy to talk about one’s faith, especially when you are in the spotlight, with a group you don’t know well.

I am grateful for the confirmands and for all they shared. They spoke

of the experience of acceptance by the church,
of a life devoted to growing together instead of growing apart,
of their confidence that the church will continue to help them learn and develop,
of their conviction that baptism means welcoming anyone into the family of God.

They announced that the church

is a holy place that tries to be loving to everyone
and a family in which they feel safe.

One wrote, “I want to be a Presbyterian because everyone is welcome.”

Friends, this is countercultural. These committed young people fly in the face of present trends. The sense of community in America is rapidly eroding. National commentator, David Brooks, recently spoke of this in recommending two recent books, Coming Apart by Charles Murray and The Fractured Republic by Yuval Levin.

Think of those titles: Coming Apart. The Fractured Republic.

Brooks puts it this way: “We are less embedded in tight, soul-forming institutions. In our cultural emphasis and life, we’ve gone from a community focus – such as being part of a congregation – to an identity focus,” one which we claim as individuals.

The answer is not nostalgia. Instead, “it is big push toward the local face-to-face community level, avoiding the excesses both of rigid centralization and alienating individualism.”

This is tough. Tough when we no longer want to open the door of our home, even though it may be someone selling Girl Scout cookies. Tough when we no longer even answer our phone without first screening our calls.

Community is hard.
Jan Holton teaches at Yale Divinity School. She points out today’s scripture is all about community. A centurion, almost certainly a Gentile, a non-Jew, had a sick slave. This centurion sends some Jewish elders to Jesus, imploring him for help and healing. These Jewish elders testify that the centurion loves the community; indeed, he is the one who provided funds for the construction of their synagogue.

Now, wait just a minute. Think about that. Our church just finished a several million dollar capital initiative. We are renovating our sanctuary and pipe organ, paying off our debt, making improvements to our fellowship hall, giving away a quarter of a million dollars to our mission partners.

What would have happened if we had responded differently? What would have happened if you and I said, “I didn’t grow up here. This isn’t my community.” Or “I’ve only been a church member for the last eleven years or the last eleven months. I don’t need to give.” Or “I’ve lived in Sarasota all my life. My family has supported every initiative since the 1950’s. I’m tired. It’s someone else’s turn.”

What would have happened if our mothers and fathers had turned away from the global threats of the Second World War? What would have happened if we had turned our heads to the plight of the British and French? Ignored the deaths of our servicemen at Pearl Harbor? Pulled the covers up over our heads and hoped it would all just go away?

The centurion stands with his neighbors. He makes his stand with his neighbors in the village of Capernaum. They are Jewish. He’s not. They are Galilean. Likely he is not.

And it doesn’t end there. He takes up the cause of his slave. The message he sends to Jesus is not “Oh, you are that famous teacher and healer; well, I’m the powerful centurion of this town; let’s get together over a meal.” No, his concern is for the well-being of a member of the community, even his servant.

This is why our Stephen Ministers listen and pray and care early and late.

This is why our deacons visit and call and write care notes.

This is why Margaret and Steven and Cheryl and Floyd and I gather every Tuesday to plan and plot calls and visits of care and encouragement.

This is why we craft artistic We Care posters and provide meals for those in the midst of chemo and pray and pray and pray.

We do it because we are a part of a community in Christ’s name, a community that calls us beyond ourselves. Through Christ’s community, the world is transformed. In community, we experience the power of God’s life-changing presence.

Jan Holton sums it up: “Often we cling to a stoic sense of private faith that [keeps us] from calling out to others in need. When we finally do reach out, too often we do so with a sense of shame or failure that our faith is not strong enough to go it alone. But a lived faith requires the larger community to speak with us and for us. It is this faith that helps us through the joys and tragedies of life – this faith [that enables us to discover] the grace of Jesus Christ.”

Community is hard. But it can be so, so good.

That’s exactly what the centurion’s friends were doing in this passage. They, the larger community, were speaking on his behalf. Then they, his friends, come to Jesus to share the centurion’s message. “Lord, there is no need for you to come to my house. I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.”
The centurion trusts Jesus enough to speak a word at a distance, without his presence, without a touch, without a comforting embrace.

The centurion was sure he was unworthy. I expect that may have been how a few of the confirmation class were feeling last Tuesday night. And they may have looked around the room and confused us elders for the worthy.

For our devotion at the beginning of the meal and meeting, in the presence of the confirmands, I shared these words by Joan Gray, the former moderator of the General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church: “I, the Lord, desire fellowship with you more than anything else in the universe. You often expect me, the Lord, to bless you most in your abundance. This is not the way I work. It is my way to bless you in your lack, your failure, and your emptiness. Look for my hand moving in your life when you are feeling lonely, incompetent, and out of control.”

You see, we are all unworthy, young and old, women and men, Presbyterians forever or Presbyterians for just the last few minutes.

But God honors us when we recognize our unworthiness, when we speak on behalf of others, when we do not turn away from the path of faithfulness when we are lacking or failing or empty.

The centurion was devoted to the well-being of his servant. This is the life to which God calls us, a life beyond our fears, beyond our experiences of fracture and fragmentation, beyond our painful memories of being laughed at or excluded or forgotten.

One of our confirmands spoke about this kind of devotion in her statement of faith: “I pray we will do our best every day to live how Jesus lived. . . . in a life devoted to standing together, as one body of Christ, for better or for worse. A life devoted to abolishing human trafficking, sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and overall hate. A life devoted to ensuring that war isn’t always around the corner. A life devoted to representing the oppressed. A life full of God’s rich and never-ending love.”

“This is the life I choose to live,“ she said. “I feel the most alive when I take risks to devote myself to following Jesus.”

Fear is powerful. But God’s Word is more powerful still. The centurion seeks not Jesus’ presence, not his approval, not his personal embrace and blessing. No, he seeks only a word from Jesus, a word with the power to heal someone else.

This is faith. This is faith, a trust which renounces fear and clings to God’s Word.

A few days ago, the national Workgroup on Constructive Theology released a brief video on faith. The workgroup includes a number of thinkers and scholars from a variety of Christian traditions. The video is entitled “Fear Not!” Two of our Faith Focus Weekend speakers, Cynthia Rigby and Shannon Craigo-Snell, participated.

Over and over again, they announce, “fear not!” is the message of the scriptures. Fear not! Fear not! Be not afraid!”

Fear is the opposite of faith, they announce, and we need not be afraid. For the Lord is our light and our salvation, and the Lord is the stronghold of our life.

But we are surrounded by fear, and community is hard. In such a time, we are tempted to turn to those who would manipulate us by our fears.
We are invited to fear immigrants and refugees.
    But we are reminded of the words of Jesus:
        I was hungry and you gave me food.
        I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.
        I was a stranger and you welcomed me.
We are invited to fear people of color and different ethnicities.
    But we are reminded that we are all beloved children of God.
        In Christ, we are one.
We are invited to fear the poor.
    But we remember and share the words of Jesus:
        God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
We are invited to fear people of differing religions and differing gender identities.
    But we remember the commandment to love has no preconditions,
        and we recall the words of Jesus:
            Love one another. Even as I have loved you, love one another.

The video closes with a quote from Nelson Mandela. “May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.”

Jesus was amazed at the faith of the centurion. He was amazed by the centurion’s ability to set aside his fears and push forward.

Friends, on that great day to come, when our Lord Jesus returns and brings down the curtain on human history, no matter who or how we are, young or old, hip or not, cool or not, nervous or confident, I pray that we may be found in community.

May we be found together as a people of acceptance, welcoming others, a holy people who try to love everyone, a family in which all are welcome. Even though we are unworthy or afraid, may we be found faithful, clinging to one another in love.

    God’s mercy is deeper than we first recognize. Divine love is more than we initially expect.
    In the face of our unworthiness, God’s mercy is enough.
    In the midst of our fears, divine love is enough.
    It is enough.