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**Knowing the Heart of God**  
Mark 6:34

In February of 1862 the 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment of the Illinois volunteers saw their first major action against Confederate forces. After five months of training at Cairo, Illinois, they moved by boat to Fort Henry, Tennessee which surrendered after heavy shelling. Then they marched twelve miles to Fort Donelson. There they took positions facing the Confederate lines. After a sleepless night contending with rain turning into snow and sleet the Confederates attacked before breakfast. The Illinois 31<sup>st</sup> bore the brunt of the attack. One eyewitness wrote later that the sound of the clash was deafening. 260 men and officers were hit by enemy fire. Some lay where they fell in the snow. Others were taken to the rear.

While greatly outnumbered and sustaining huge losses the inexperienced Illinois soldiers held their position for two hours until reinforcements arrived. Their tenacity under fire gave General Grant one of his first victories and secured Kentucky and Western Tennessee against any future Confederate invasion. But the price they paid was heavy. A member of the regiment later described that price in these words:

...every mounted officer present in the action was killed or wounded, and of the company officers, the majority had met death or wounds. The men, who fought in the ranks so stubbornly and survived the conflict, well remember the shortened line as it now appeared at roll call or parade. Hardly a home in Southern Illinois was not bereft of some member of it, or some friend attached to it (W. S. Morris, L. D. Hartwell, J. B. Kuykendall, *History*, 31<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Illinois Volunteers, pages 36-40).

One of the homes which was bereft was that of my great-grandfather, Samuel Huey, near Sparta, Illinois. His older brother died of wounds suffered in that battle. Less than two years later, when Samuel turned eighteen, he broke his mother's heart once again when he took his fallen brother's place, enlisting in the Illinois 31<sup>st</sup>. He saw action in the Battle of Atlanta and Sherman's march to the sea. When the war ended Samuel came home, but by then his mother had died.

It was this kind of brokenness that Jesus addressed in the sixth chapter of Mark. There we read that the disciples have completed their first missionary journey. They come back excited and surprised by the results of their preaching, teaching, and healing in the name of Jesus. They have marvelous stories to tell. But as they talk Jesus notices that they are exhausted by the rigors of their journey. He proposes that they go together to a deserted place where they can rest and debrief. They are ready for a vacation. But the crowds which have responded so enthusiastically to Jesus' ministry do not permit them to escape. Recognizing where Jesus and the disciples are going the crowds intercept them. There will be no opportunity for rest. The vacation is cancelled.

It is significant that Jesus does not show any irritation about this turn of events. Jesus recognizes that this is a pivotal moment for his ministry. The memory of his rejection in his home town of Nazareth is fresh in his mind. There he was amazed by the unbelief of the people who felt they had no need of his ministry. Now he is confronted by people who are very much in touch with their

brokenness and are actively seeking what he has to offer. When Jesus looks at them he sees people who are like sheep without a shepherd. They come with their broken hearts looking for a compassionate God who will enter into their suffering. Jesus does not hesitate to respond to their pain. Mark tells us that Jesus looked upon them with compassion.

Mark uses this story to instill within his readers a sense of who God is. God is the One who sees our brokenness and identifies with our pain. Jesus' mission is to respond with the heart of God.

This understanding of God was central to the theology of John Calvin. Like us, Calvin struggled with the meaning of human suffering. He was to the end of his life a refugee living in exile. He lived in a world where disease and plague claimed thousands including many of his friends. He knew all too well the threat of war and genocide. In 1545 Calvin was traumatized for weeks when he heard that 3,600 Waldensian Christians (men, women, and children) had been butchered for their faith. In 1562 he was deeply grieved by the news that hundreds of his followers had been ambushed and massacred in church by the Duke of Guise in the French village of Wassy. Calvin did not live to see the St. Bartholomew Day massacre where thousands of his followers were killed, but he would not have been surprised by it.

The theologian William Stacy Johnson has described Calvin's understanding of how God responds to human brokenness:

Warfare, genocide, famine, ecological threats and more all prompt us to cry out with the Psalmist, "How long, O Lord?" What we make of this cry depends on how we envision God and God's relationship to the world. Calvin noted that whenever and wherever human beings cry out for justice, a miracle occurs; our cries become, in a certain sense, the very cries of God...when we cry, God cries with us...This view of a compassionate and responsive God in solidarity with human suffering provides the best lens through which to understand Calvin's theology (William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin, Reformer for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, pages 13-14).

Having lived among sheep without a shepherd and having been a man with a broken heart, Calvin knew what it meant to be embraced by the compassion of God. Knowing the heart of God made all the difference in Calvin's life and theology.

It is the heart of God that is revealed to King David when he sets out to build for God a temple. In the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of 2 Samuel we read that the Lord had given David rest from his enemies. He had successfully consolidated his power. He was ready to move beyond the struggle for survival and establish his legacy as a king. The first issue David notices is that as King he lives in a finely appointed house while the ark of the covenant (representing the presence of God) resides in a tent. So David concludes that he should build a magnificent house for God.

In drawing up this plan David has profoundly misunderstood the heart of God. A new prophet suddenly appears on the scene to correct David's faulty vision of God. The prophet Nathan tells David that the Lord does not want him to build a temple. Instead God wants to build a house for David. God wants to establish David and his family as a vehicle for grace. God is primarily interested in the brokenness of the people. God wants David to respond to the people with the same compassion he has received from God. Only then can he be a true shepherd who is guided by the heart of God.

It is that understanding which defines the mission of this church. We, too, have been shaped by the grace of the One who enters into the pain of human brokenness. It is that compassion which inspires us to serve others. The practice of that compassion enables us to know the heart of God.