

### **The First Reading is Ezekiel 36:26-28**

<sup>26</sup> A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. <sup>28</sup> Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

### **The Second Reading is Matthew 9:35-37**

<sup>35</sup> Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. <sup>37</sup> Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup> therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

### **The Message is entitled *The Heart of Christ***

Last week as we explored our understanding of our identity statement about who we are as a church, we learned through Apostle Paul that the mind of Christ is characterized by self-emptying, humility and obedience. The self-emptying nature of Christ's mind was his willingness to look to the interest of others, rather than to his own self-interests. Christ's humility was demonstrated in his ability to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, as he didn't let his notoriety swell his ego or cause him to forget that all of humanity, including the least and the lost, were deeply loved by God. Christ's obedience was demonstrated in his commitment to follow the ways of God's love even though it was arduous and fraught with peril that led to his death. As Apostle Paul said to the faithful in Philippi, "Let the same mind be in you that is in Christ Jesus." So, let us recommit to living ever more faithfully the mind of Christ each and every day.

Now let's turn again, as we did last week, to the front of the bulletin and say together our identity statement, which is found just below the name of our church: "Living the heart and mind of Christ at the heart of the city." This week we will be exploring what it might mean for us to live more fully the heart of Christ.

I begin by sharing what scripture teaches us about Christ's heart. Listen to this litany of passages from the Gospels and see if you can begin to detect the heart of Christ:

- "Jesus had compassion on two blind men and touched their eyes. Immediately they received sight." [Matthew 20:34]
- "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. [Matthew 11:28]
- "When Jesus saw her [a widow at Nain], he had compassion on her." [Luke 7:13]
- "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick." [Matthew 14:14]
- "When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved... Jesus began to weep." [John 11:33, 35]

- “When Jesus ... saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. [Mark 6:34]
- “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.” [Matthew 9:36]

Jesus’ heart is moved when he sees. Did you notice how often the word “saw” preceded his compassionate response? When Jesus sees, really sees, others he is moved with compassion. Yet, what enables Jesus to really see? I suggest that Jesus is able to see others and discern their spirit because his heart is schooled in the heart of God. Throughout the gospels, we read about Jesus attending to the heart of God. Listen again to this litany from scripture demonstrating the depth of Jesus’ relationship with the divine mystery we call God. “Jesus prayed alone in a certain place... He rose early in the morning while it was still dark... He went into the wilderness or even up a mountain.” Jesus spent time in the loving heart of God through prayer. Just weeks ago, we celebrated, Emmanuel. We celebrated that God is with us through the person of Christ Jesus, the one who sees us and compassionately responds to us.

But, what does the biblical Greek word translated as compassion really mean? The literal meaning of the word is “to suffer with.” Yet, compassion isn’t only suffering with or feeling for the one who suffers that is empathy. Empathy means we understand the suffering of another and can identify with a person’s distress, as in imagining walking in their shoes. Whereas, compassion is empathy in action. Compassion conveys that the one who sees is motivated to relieve or reduce the suffering seen. In a biblical sense compassion comes from the gut or from deep within our inner parts. Something core within us is deeply moved by what we see and motivates us to respond. That is what compassion means. Like the six-year girl who sees hungry children and chooses only a fourth of the candy bar instead of a half, so she can share with others.

Jesus was empathetic, but he was also compassionate as he was moved to relieve or reduce the suffering he saw in others. And all through scripture we know that his compassion changed the course of lives: the blind received sight, the dead were raised, the sick were cured, the lame could walk, the outcasts were restored.

Brandon Heath, a contemporary Christian artist has a song entitled, “Give Me Your Eyes.” Listen to the concluding line of each of the verses of this song that Heath sings:

“All those people going somewhere, why have I never cared?”

All those people. All those people I cross paths with yet I never really see them. I never seem to care. In this song Brandon realizes that he lacks compassion. He may occasionally have empathy or sympathy or even pity, yet the words he doesn’t even really see the people who are all around him. He doesn’t really see the potential suffering of others, so there is no response. Listen now to the words of his haunting refrain given his lack of seeing and caring for all those people going somewhere, for he sings:

“Give me your eyes for just one second  
 Give me your eyes so I can see,  
 Everything that I keep missing,  
 Give me your love for humanity.

Give me your arms for the broken-hearted  
The ones that are far beyond my reach.  
Give me Your heart for the ones forgotten.  
Give me Your eyes so I can see.”

“Give me your eyes so that I can see,” sings Heath. Give me your eyes that are schooled in the compassionate loving kindness of God’s heart.

So, what is the condition of your heart this morning? What is the condition of our collective hearts as a church this morning? Are our hearts like stone or are they hearts of flesh? Are our hearts attuned to the heart of God that we see most fully expressed in the person of Jesus Christ? Or are our hearts attuned only to self-interest? Are our hearts compassionate towards others, individually and communally, for the broken-hearted and forgotten, as Heath sings?

In researching this sermon, I came across a number of articles, including one by Psychologist Jeremy Dean, who wrote, “Compassion is not something you either have or you don’t – it can (and should) be learned and nurtured.” I find this good news for all of us, because all of us have experienced at some point in our lives Heath’s words, “Why have I never cared?” The good news offered by Dean is that we can learn to care. We can learn to be compassionate. We can learn to see with Jesus’ eyes, but spoiler alert it will take practice, practice, practice.

Elaine Houston, a Behavioral Science graduate entitled her article, “12 Best Compassion Training Exercises and Activities,” and she affirmed Dean’s conclusion that compassion can be learned. She suggests that one of the best ways to nurture our compassion muscle is to be present to now, to be fully present to any given moment. When we are present to the moment we are capable of seeing others as Jesus did. When we are not distracted by what we left undone or by what we still need to do, we can be more aware of what is in the present moment. When we are fully present or mindful as our Eastern brothers and sisters say, we are more able to notice not only what is going on inside of ourselves, but also in others. We notice a person’s tears or their frustrations. We notice the plight of those whose path we cross.

I remember one encounter at a fast food establishment, when in the present moment I noticed the voice in an employee’s welcome that didn’t reflect her posture. I simply asked, “How are you today?” What poured forth was an incredible story of compassion. This was her last day on the job, because she had quit so she could move out of state to spend whatever time her best friend from college had left on earth. Her friend was dying of cancer and she was going to help her with her bucket list. I asked if I could hold the two of them in prayer in the days, weeks and maybe even months ahead. Compassion moved both of us to act.

In the moment, we also can practice being intentionally compassionate with ourselves, for sometimes we are hardest on ourselves. Our lists of self-judgments are often relentless, for we were not good enough or smart enough. Of course, we do the same to others as well, more often judging them rather than just seeing them as fellow travelers on this road called life. Houston suggests another compassionate practice is to focus on our similarities as human beings rather than our differences, and when we do we can begin to see our own situation as

well as the situations of others with compassion. When we see everyone as God's precious and beloved children, compassion will flow.

Houston has ten other suggestions to strengthen our compassion muscles including active listening and volunteering. I practice both of these on Wednesday mornings when I volunteer at Kingsbury Elementary School and let me tell you that it benefits me as much or maybe even more than it does the children who read to me. I loved my conversation with Charlotte this past Wednesday, as the story she read to me led her to ask me questions about my own family. What a delight it was to watch her connect the story to her own life and then to mine. Did you know that researchers confirm that children as young as six or seven years old have the capacity for compassion? They have the capacity to see others as they are and be moved to respond with care and loving kindness. I have seen compassion expressed between these first graders, especially for Emma who broke her arm over winter break.

So, on this second Sunday of the New Year, as we continue to unpack our identity statement as a church I simply ask, "What is the condition of your compassion muscle?" Is it well developed and able to really see others motivating you to respond compassionately as Jesus did? Do we have the heart of Christ?

I have a confession to make. When I first heard Brandon Heath's song, "Give Me Your Eyes," I distinctly remember saying out loud to God in the confines of my car as I commuted, "No! No, I don't want your eyes God. If I had your eyes I would be overwhelmed with the immensity of the suffering in this world. No God, please don't give me your eyes." Yet, remember what Brandon sings, "Give me your eyes for just one second." Give me your eyes, O God, for this moment in time only. Give me your eyes so that I might really see the person I encounter. In this present moment give me your eyes whether I'm at the airport or grocery store, at church or a local park, in the break room at work or on the play yard at school. Give me your eyes so that I might exercise my compassion muscle.

Yet, we all know the possibility of being overwhelmed by the world's suffering, even if we only have God's eyes for one second. There is even a name for this condition called compassion fatigue. Just reading the headlines can spark an episode: raging wildfires in Australia, Iran admits to accidentally shooting down Ukrainian airliner killing everyone on board including a newlywed couple, the ever-increasing homelessness crisis, earthquakes in Puerto Rico, massive migration of refugees fleeing for their lives, severe storms in the south claiming lives. Having God's eyes will make us aware of the overwhelming need worldwide.

Yet, Heath doesn't ask to see everything all at once, he only asks to see those he encounters in a given moment. Lord, help me to see, really see this precious first grader who is reading to me at this moment with your eyes. Lord, help me to really see this grocery employee who is helping me at the moment. Lord, help me to see my spouse with your eyes. When we stay in the present moment something amazing happens, because even in the midst of a crisis we are able to connect with one another and sense that there is a greater whole than just the isolation, pain and suffering. As Nelson Mandela shared, "Our compassion binds us the one to the other – not in pity or patronizing, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future." "Love and compassion are necessities, not

luxuries,” says the Dalai Lama, “Without them humanity cannot survive.” This is why we need God’s eyes for just one second, for just the moment we find ourselves in.

If someone were to ask me what do you think it means for your church to live the heart of Christ, I would respond with something like this: It means that as a church we will be moved in the moment by the suffering we collectively see and prayerfully respond to. One such recent example was the money we raised to purchase and deliver needed supplies for immigrants being bused into our community without resources. We raised nearly \$2,000 and marshalled the help of volunteers to purchase and deliver the goods. On a personal level, I think it means being present in the moment with another human being wherever we may find ourselves and as I shared last week Mister Rogers exemplified that for us!

Being present to the moment is something that we all have to practice all the days of our lives, as we will never achieve it constantly. Not even Mister Rogers did. And given our 21<sup>st</sup> century context that is awash with 24/7 distractions, from our self-interest to our electronics, to news feeds that drown us in despair, living the heart of Christ takes practice, practice, practice.

So, let’s practice. Who will you really see and connect to today? Who will we really see as a church and connect to today? May we see and compassionately respond with the heart of Christ. Amen.