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## **Our Hearts' Deepest Desire**

**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

Years ago, Eric and I spent a year in the southwestern part of West Virginia. We were working as seminary interns for the First Presbyterian Church of Huntington, WVA. The congregation in Huntington maintained a small mission chapel that was about an hour away. And one of our duties that year was to drive church vans to pick up children who lived in the steep valleys every Monday afternoon after school and bring them to church for a youth program that was held at the tiny Chapel. The program was nothing fancy. Eric and I drove the vans up into the valleys (or hollers) and children would emerge from all directions. In that part of the county, the poverty was palpable and many of the children lived in houses without indoor plumbing, central heat or air, and sometimes without the basics of health care. Once the school buses dropped those children off after school, there was nothing else to do. They didn't have cars or the disposable income to go to soccer practice or piano or dance lessons. The bus dropped them off and they stayed there until the bus came to pick them up the next morning. So, when – on Monday afternoons – they heard the sound of the church van engines coming up the road, it sounded like freedom and escape to them, and so they came running. From 3 to 18, children flooded the vans and we would make three or four trips each to pick up the children to deliver them to the Chapel. There we had a Bible lesson, snack and games. Then, we repeated the process to deliver them home and then Eric and I drove the hour to return to Huntington.

I was struck and stunned by the need and the poverty of the region. But when Eric and I moved from West Virginia and then to Columbia, SC in 1990 to begin our ministry here, what struck us was the wealth and excess. The contrast between a community where a simple Bible lesson, snack and games would cause children to run to get on a church van on Monday afternoon, to a community where there were so many options and choices that coming to worship on Sunday mornings was sometimes squeezed out. On the face of things, it seemed that there was no need. And having no need, meant that it was difficult to uncover any need for God.

I came to understand that often it is need, lack, pain, illness and suffering that uncovers our need for God and reveals the inadequacy of our wealth to meet our deepest needs.

So, while Herod is having a lavish birthday party in the palace earlier in Mark 6 – the place to be for anyone who is anyone – and speculating about who this Jesus might be. The poor, suffering

and ill in Herod's territory know immediately and viscerally who Jesus is! The poor and suffering flock to Jesus and to his disciples in such numbers that they don't even have time to eat or to rest. The need of the people is evident, and Jesus sees, acknowledges and meets their needs with love and compassion.

Most of the time, you and I are more like the folks at Herod's birthday party, deciding between social engagements and worrying about what others will think and whether or not we have gained too much weight to fit into our party gowns, than we are like the poor who rushed about to bring their sick friends and who begged Jesus to allow them to touch him. Our need is met . . . . or at least covered up by our excess.

So, if we have no need, then we need no savior. And if we need no savior, we believe we can supply our own need and save ourselves. It is only when the veneer of normal and the inadequacy of our own power is exposed that we seek Jesus with the abandon recorded in Mark's gospel. That is why church attendance swelled following 9/11, but fell off again when life settled into its normal excess, and why people showed up in worship again after the bottom fell out of the economy in 2009. We seek God when we have a need.

Scripture invites us today to examine our lives and our hearts and to be honest as we evaluate our own need and the many ways in which we work to meet, to cover over and to disguise our need. The story in Mark's Gospel, the passage in Ephesians and our own experience suggests that human beings have deep and continuous needs:

- For healing
- For love and touch
- For peace
- For compassion
- For reconciliation
- For inclusion and recognition
- For rest

And these needs exist whether we are rushing to find Jesus and begging him to touch us, or whether we are at Herod's birthday party. The difference between the people who ran to touch Jesus and Herod's friends is how they choose to try to meet their need. Herod and his friends cover their need with too much food and drink and beautiful dancing girls. The poor, ill and hungry don't have that option, so they seek Jesus with abandon and desperation.

We are invited today to consider how the excess in our lives prevents us from seeking the one person and the one relationship that could actually meet our needs and reconcile our lives. And we are invited today to examine what we have substituted for the Kingdom of God. It occurred to me that instead of the reconciliation that Jesus offers and that Ephesians so dramatically describes – "Jesus is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Eph 2:14 – we retreat into like-minded groups and call it reconciliation.

It is hard to translate the power of this Ephesians text on reconciliation because we don't really have an easy equivalent to the divide that existed in the early church between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the Gentile followers of Jesus. But wherever there are groups that claim that they alone are faithful and exclude other believers because they are different, Ephesians should get in their way. What Ephesians describes is NOT a process by which the Gentile believers have to become like the Jewish believers to be reconciled to God. INSTEAD, what Ephesians says is that Jesus takes the Jews and the Gentiles and makes them into a NEW community – a new reality – a third race of people who, in their new state become one, new people. The reconciliation that Christ produces is NOT obtained by retreating into like-minded communities or excluding those who disagree with us. The reconciliation that Christ produces is obtained by being willing to leave everything but a desire to know and to touch God behind and to be healed and made new by that whole heart and whole body pursuit of God.

The time has come for the Church of Jesus Christ to seek to know and to love God more than all else; more than political loyalty, more than economic security, more than theological purity, more than social approval. And that sort of whole body discipleship requires that we begin by admitting our hearts' deepest desires: healing, love, touch, peace, reconciliation, inclusion and rest. God offers all of those in Christ.

I find it refreshing and joyous that what Jesus says to his disciples when they return from their first mission trip is, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." (Mark 6:31) Neither the Church of Jesus Christ nor the culture in which we live says that very often. In fact, you know where I hear the invitation to rest most? In a Friday yoga class I attend. I joke and say that on Friday in that yoga class is the only time when anyone says to me, "I want you to lie still and calm your mind and rest for five minutes in the dark." No wonder the room is full.

Here we have Jesus, telling us to take time and rest. Isn't it ironic in so many ways that the Church and worship in particular has become the main time people decide to rest. We as a culture can get to work, get to sporting events, get to movies, get to parties, get to yoga, but when we need a rest, the most optional event in our week is Sunday worship – present company excluded of course!

But – perhaps – only when we – The Church – begin to identify and name our real needs – love, touch, reconciliation, healing, reconciliation, peace – and to address those needs, maybe worship will no longer be optional.

If Christ was about the ministry of compassion – we are to do the same.

If Christ was about the ministry of healing and feeding – we are to do the same.

If Christ was about the ministry of bridging differences and reconciling conflicts – we are to do the same.

If Christ was about inviting us to rest – we are to rest and to invite others to rest as well (Take your Sabbath to rest)

If Christ was about compassion (suffering with people) – we are to do the same.

IF Christ was able to take strangers and aliens and make them brothers and sisters in Christ – we are to do the same.

To do that we have to

- Acknowledge our need and uncover those true needs by peeling back some of the excess by which we try to cover those needs.
- Be willing to give up our certainty and dividing walls to pursue Jesus with reckless abandon so that we will become a new race – a new community – a new people.

What Ephesians seems to say is that when we are willing to do that, then we will become a place and a people in whom God lives. And when God lives in us, the healing and reconciliation and peace will continue. Why aren't more people healed? Why is there so much conflict? Maybe it is because the people in whom God is to dwell have been filling their lives with other gods and covering their need for God with other things.

Today, Jesus invites us all to come away to a deserted place and rest a while. Make time to rest in the God who knows us, loves us, claims us and redeems us. Seek THAT God with our head, heart and hands.