

## **Everything Is Grace** **1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

### **How many digital photos do you have?**

As you know, Juhee and I adopted our first dog, Joy recently. Many things have changed since she joined our family. First, we wash our hands more often than we did because Joy licks them. We also clean the house more often than we used to. We also take a lot of photos of Joy. I checked how many photos I have on my computer. Can you guess how many photos I have taken? Almost 30 thousand photos and a thousand videos. Smartphones and digital cameras have made it easy to take photos and store them. The downside of this is that we don't often see those photos after we take them. When we do open the digital album or photobook and see them, they make us smile and our hearts are filled with warmth and joy. We tend not to remember days but we remember moments and these photos remind us of the most beautiful and precious moments of our lives. Sometimes, a family picture taken during a vacation can comfort us and sustain us in challenging times. Sometimes, a picture from our honeymoon can help a couple reconcile after a big squabble. When I have quarreled with Juhee, pictures from our trip to Zion Canyon remind me of our wonderful times together and make me say, "I'm sorry" to Juhee. Of course, this therapy does not always work, but I believe you get my point.

### **Remember...**

In today's scripture, Paul wants to remind the Corinthian Christians of the good news they have received. As we all know, the Corinthian church had many problems. It was divided by factionalism. Many of the people had a superiority complex so they competed with one another. Moral depravity, excessive drinking, and abuse of holy communion were happening. Church members sued other church members. Although Methodist pastors agree to go wherever the bishop appoints them, I am pretty sure that the Corinthian church would be a church that pastors would rather not go to. The core problem of the Corinthian Christians was that they didn't change their lives or the bad cultures of their society in terms of the gospel. Rather, they changed and culturalized Christian messages in terms of their own cultures including bad ones. However, Paul did not give up on the church he founded and reminded them of how they were saved. He invited them to remember the moment that they first heard the amazing good news and the moment that they accepted Christ as their savior and changed their lives. Paul might have hoped that this remembrance of that first moment would renew their spiritual life.

Of course, our beloved Asbury UMC is not like the Corinthian church and I am really glad for it. However, we also need to hear Paul's message because Christianity today has been overly culturalized and thus, our spiritual life also needs to be refreshed and renewed. When I first served an American congregation, I gradually realized that Christianity in Korea and Christianity in the United States are somewhat different. My impression is that Christianity in the United States has been deeply culturalized, so it is a part of American culture. That is good in some aspects and bad in some.

It's like Confucianism in Korea. While there are few people who actually practice Confucianism as religion, Confucianism has shaped the cultural ethos and values of Korean in many aspects. The same is true to Christianity in America. Many social values have been shaped in accordance with Christian values. That's good.

The downside is that Christianity has lost its power to be different from the world and the church has become like a social club. Each year, a pastor must fill out a statistical report for the

Conference and this year Lee and David helped me with numbers because they love numbers. Right? I checked our official church membership. Do you know how many members Asbury has in our membership record? Over 300 people. I have been a pastor at Asbury for 3 years but I have only met a quarter of that number so far.

People come to the church only for their children's baptisms or the funeral of their friends. As a pastor, I sometimes receive a phone call from a funeral home asking if I could lead a funeral for someone who was a member of our church or a family of an Asbury church member. When I receive those calls, I check with our long-time members as to whether they knew the person. In many cases, they only know their names because they had not been at the church for decades. When I was in Korea, I had heard that people in Europe go to church three times in their lifetime, for their Baptism, wedding and funeral. I think that many Christians in the United States follow the same path. Christianity has become a culture and Christian liturgy is a kind of cultural ceremony that has lost its religious meaning.

### **Remember the gospel!**

What we and those people who have stopped coming to church need is to remember the first moment that we decided to accept Jesus Christ as our savior. When did you decide to follow Jesus? Some of us were born into a Christian family but at a certain point of our life, you must have accepted Jesus and decided to follow him. When was it? For me, it was when I was 14 years old. I went on a youth retreat and during our prayer time, strangely, I believed Jesus Christ had died for my sin and I was accepted by his love. It was God's grace. After 3 hours of prayer, I still remember the fresh cold air of the winter I breathed and I couldn't forget that moment. When I almost quit my ministry, God again gently embraced what I am. Because of that grace, here I am with you this morning. I bet we all have those moments, and we need to cherish them.

Apostle Paul asked the Corinthian church to remember the first moment that they heard the good news and decided to follow Jesus! What was the gospel? "Christ died for our sins! He was buried and is risen!" The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ show God's unconditional love for us. We don't earn God's love but God loves us. It's grace and Paul knew it. "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God, but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain."

By the grace of God, we are who we are and what we are as God's children. Christianity is a religion of grace and we just need to accept God's grace into our hearts. God will never let you go even in times of doubt and spiritual wandering. Sometimes, God powerfully draws us nearer and all we need to do is not resist God's grace.

I think a rip current in the ocean can be a good analogy for God's love. A rip current is a strong current of water that moves away from the shore. No matter how good a swimmer you are, you cannot escape from a rip current by swimming against the current. Similarly, sometimes, God's love and grace powerfully draw us nearer to God and we are afraid of it because it moves us beyond our comfort zone. We also don't want to lose control of our lives so we resist God's grace. "God, that's enough! I won't go further" may be our response. Unlike a rip current, however which is dangerous, God's rip current of love and grace leads us to deep life with God and full life with our neighbors. When you feel that God draws you to near, just surrender and let God lead.

### **Everything is Grace!**

Everything is grace. We don't have to earn some qualifications to be loved by God. Everything is grace. That's the core belief of Methodists. God's prevenient grace helps us to

realize and respond to God's calling when God draws us near. By justifying grace, we are freely forgiven and called to be God's children. By sanctifying grace, we can continue our spiritual journey for personal and social transformation. If you feel that somehow you are astray from God, remember the powerful moment when God's grace overwhelmingly drew you into a deep relationship with God. From those memories, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, we can restart again. Everything is grace, so let us graciously accept God's invitation for communion with God.