

“The Cross: the most painful but the most glorious”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Mark 8:31-38 (Feb 28, 2021)

During nurturing Christine nowadays, pastor Ran and I often wonder about when Caleb was a baby like Christine so now we search Caleb's old pictures and videos while recalling our old memories about Caleb. This is the story when Caleb had been learning how to eat by himself first time. **(Slide 1)** At that time, he was so used to be fed by others, so it was very difficult to teach him how to feed himself. First, we trained him to hold his bottle by himself. He needed help to finish the bottle, but he could hold and feed himself well enough. And then, as he started to eat solid food, we taught him to open his mouth to be fed. As he learned that, he just opened his mouth, waiting until I fed him. Therefore, later we had to teach him to pick up a snack and put it into his mouth by himself. For this, we gave him a big and wide rice snack. At first, he took time to pick it up but as time goes by, he gets used to it. His skill at picking things up has been developed. So lately, we have been giving him a smaller – tiny little snack, to help his finger movement. When he first had this tiny little snack, he was fascinated by its taste, so he became very busy at picking it up more and more. However, since he was not good at picking it up with his finger, he used to pick it up by clenching his fist. When he had a big and wide snack, picking it up by clenching his fist and eating with clenched fist was not a problem at all, but as he gets a smaller snack, he was no longer able to eat it by clenching it. As he clenched his fist hard to grip the small snacks, they were just stuck and hidden in his fist. He was struggling to eat them. Although he knew that his snack was in his fist, he could not eat it with a clenched fist. Watching his struggle made me have mixed emotions, so funny but so sorry. Poor baby... Caleb finally cried with two clenched fists without knowing how to eat. He did not know the great irony: he has to open his hand to eat rather than keep it clenched. Likewise, many times our lives seem to be full of ironies, but the irony does not always bring us a trial, rather sometimes we learn a great lesson from it.

(Slide 2) In today's gospel story, Mark 8:31-38, we encounter a great irony of the faith, which is the most painful/ but the most glorious one: the Cross. As we shared last week, the Cross is one of the most important signs in Christian faith. It reminds us of the fate of Jesus Christ, because the cross is

the reason why Jesus has come. Although the cross is the sign of painful suffering and death, at the same time, it is the sign of glorious victory and resurrection. Therefore, I would like to discern a deeper meaning of the cross today.

First, the cross is not what we actually have in mind. When we are confronted with the necessity of suffering, our common reaction looks exactly like Peter's. All the followers of Jesus Christ are amazed and fascinated by his almighty power, because he had all kind of victories. Jesus healed a leper, he healed a man with a withered hand, he healed a paralyzed man, he gave sight to a blind, he defeated the devil, he revived a dead person, he fed thousands of people with a small amount of food, he walked on the sea, and he stopped the storm. Every miracle that he did proved that he is the son of God and the Messiah whom will save them. In Mark 8:27-29, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They told him, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets." Again, Jesus asked them, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" This time, Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Their faith to him has never been in doubt. However, when Jesus told his disciples about his upcoming death and resurrection, they could not believe it, so even Peter, who was a great follower, took him aside and began to rebuke him. Although Jesus told them the reality of why he had come, it was just too much for the disciples to bear, so Peter attempted to keep him from such a future. Actually, through Jesus' healing miracles and all his ministry and compassion for the weak, we are convinced that God does not delight in human suffering. Therefore, the disciples were sent out to heal as well as to preach the gospel.

However, why does Jesus, who is the son of God and the Messiah for all, have to go through the temptation and the suffering and finally have to die on the cross? Although we know the victory on the cross, still it is very difficult to accept the other side of the cross: the pain and suffering and death on the cross. However, Jesus did not appreciate Peter's admonition, rather he was refighting the battle of temptations in the wilderness. This was the devil tempting him again to fall down and worship him, to take his way instead of God's way. Like Peter, we want to follow Jesus as much as we can. We want to take discipleship as long as the terms are reasonable and acceptable and not too costly. This shows that we would not dare to accept the cross. The

cross is not what we actually have in mind. Since we already knew that the cross not always brings us victory but also brings us pain and suffering, in front of the cross, we are agonizing over whether to take it up or not.

(Slide 3) However, the true meaning of discipleship is following, even the cross. Jesus clearly said what it means to be followers. In verse 34-35, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” This sounds ironic, but we could learn a great lesson from it. To follow the most almighty one, we have to take up the cross first. And, when we are ready to lose our life, we would rather save our life. Jesus not only spoke but also showed us what true following means as he denies himself, takes up the cross, and follows God’s will. Ultimately, discipleship means giving up everything.

(Slide 4) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a German pastor and theologian known for his opposition to National Socialism, said it best in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Only if we are ready to accept the cross - all the pain and suffering, are we finally ready to follow Jesus. It reminds me of Sir Winston Churchill. During the Second World War, when he took over the leadership of the country, all that he offered men was “blood, toil, tears and sweat.” And also, it reminds me of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the great Italian patriot, when he appealed for recruits, he said: “I offer neither pay, nor quarters, nor food; I offer only hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles and death. Let him who loves his country with his heart, and not merely with his lips, follow me.”

(Slide 5) However, we have to remember the hidden power of the cross. When we choose to follow the cross, finally the cross will lead us. We often think that we choose the cross and we take it up by ourselves, but that is not the case. It is God who leads us to take it up. Although we think that we take up the cross, as soon as we dare to follow the cross, the cross leads us to take it up. With the help of God, we take up the cross, not by ourselves. God is not only calling his people to faith and to follow but helping us and walking with us. God never let us be alone.

(Slide 6) Through the story of Abraham that we also read today, we see how God made the impossible possible. God made an unbelievable promise to Abraham and Sarah, but God finally made it through. There are many “I will” phrases in which God said, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you” “I will bless Sarah; I will give you a son by her.” Although it may sound unbelievable, unreasonable, unbearable, and unpredictable, since God promised, God made a way. In Philippians 4:13, as Paul confessed, “I can do all things through him who strengthens us.” Sometimes, God’s calling is difficult to hear and tough to respond to. Even it is a lot more difficult to follow now than it was during the time when Jesus called his disciples. Most of us, even if we think that we are quite a good Christian, easily find ourselves in Peter’s side, rather than following immediately. However, in this season of Lent, we must recognize anew what it means to follow Jesus Christ – self-denial, taking up the cross, and following Jesus Christ. We need to honestly check whether we really have the cross in our mind, and check if we are truly ready to follow Jesus Christ, even to his cross. But we need to remember if we choose to follow the cross, finally the cross will lead us by the almighty power of God.

Going back to Caleb’s story again. Caleb had an irony which couldn’t eat his snack even it was in his fist. He didn’t know he needed to open his fist first for eating them. However, when he realized the theory of it, he was trying to go further process-grip, open and move it to his mouth by action. Wow, this 8 month old boy has finally realized a great life lesson that just trying to grip hard is not the only way to possess. **(Slide 7)**

(Slide 8) Today, we learned a very valuable lesson from the irony: The cross, which is the most painful but the most glorious. It is what Jesus embraced, and also wants us to follow. I hope and pray that all of us will follow the way of cross from Jesus Christ not only knowing but also by our actions with faith during Lent.

Praise God. Amen.