

◎Everyone Wants to Be Great: On Being Great and Being Small (Mark 9:33-35)

Jesus asked his disciples, “What were you discussing on the way?” If we go back a little in this passage, there is a section with the subheading “He Again Foretells His Death and Resurrection” (Mark 9:30-32). It says, “The Son of Man will be handed over to men, and they will kill him; and three days after he is killed, he will rise again.” The disciples did not understand these words, but they were afraid to ask. From there, the disciples were on their way home. One would naturally expect that, as holy disciples chosen by Jesus, they would have been discussing—if nothing else—Jesus’ death and resurrection. When asked, “What were you discussing?” no one could answer right away. Just as Jesus was about to set out on the path toward his death—and immediately after hearing his prediction—the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest. All of them wanted to be great. Each one desired to be the greatest. This was happening at the very moment Jesus was heading toward his Passion. The disciples could not understand Jesus’ suffering; on the contrary, they were preoccupied with whether they themselves were great.

These were the twelve chosen disciples, also known as the apostles. When twelve people gather together, it’s only natural that they would keep an eye on one another and that competition would arise. Even in the society in which we live, the question of “who is the greatest” or the desire to “become great” is something we find difficult to shake off. In school, students are ranked by their grades. In human relationships, hierarchies are sometimes established as well. At work, there are those in positions of authority and those who work under them. What about in the church? At first glance, it might seem that the pastor is the most important, followed by the church officers, and then the lay members—but Paul tells us that this is absolutely not the case. I’ll discuss Paul’s words a little later.

Everyone has a desire to be great. We are no exception. When there is a hierarchy—those above and those below—it’s only natural to want to aim for the top. The original word for “great” in the Bible means “large.” It refers to having a significant presence and being valued. Wanting to be great means wanting to be a significant presence. We want to be recognized by those around us, to be thought of as amazing, to be respected, and to avoid being spoken ill of. I believe all human beings have these feelings. Conversely, the word “small” also implies “not great.” It means being small in existence—worthless, weak, and unvalued. Jesus Christ’s teaching here is one of reversal: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35). He is saying that if you want to be great, become a servant; if you want to be great, become small.

◎Christ Lifting Up a Child: Children as “Little” Beings (Mark 9:36-37)

And as an example of one such “little being,” Jesus brought a child forward. “Little” here does not refer to physical size. It means being insignificant or unimportant. He took the child by the hand, set him in the center, lifted him up, and said, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” (9:36-37)

Taking the child’s hand, placing the child in the center, lifting the child up—in all these actions, Jesus is the one doing the work. The child did nothing. The child simply let things happen and surrendered completely. This is precisely what it means to accept Jesus. And it means accepting God, who sent Jesus. Doing nothing of one’s own accord, refusing nothing. Does accepting God not mean surrendering one’s own initiative to Jesus? Rather than struggling to manage or figure things out on one’s own strength, one entrusts everything, letting things happen as they will, just like the child lifted up by Jesus.

Nowadays, many people say children are treasures, and describe them as cute or precious, but that

was not the case in Jewish society at that time. Children were considered useless—they could not contribute as laborers and were deemed worthless. They did not observe Jewish law, nor did they obey adults. Infants, in particular, could do absolutely nothing on their own; all they could do was cry out for help. Jesus took such “worthless” beings—these “little ones”—into His arms. Although they are very weak beings who can do nothing on their own—and lack even the strength to resist—precisely because of this, they can do nothing but accept what Jesus gives them; indeed, they can accept everything. In reality, they are also very strong beings. It is precisely these weak, small children who are actually the greatest. This is the very essence of Christ’s teaching of reversal. To “lift up” means to bring them up to Jesus’ eye level. This child saw the same view that Jesus was seeing. A child, who normally can only see the world from a child’s perspective, saw the world as Jesus saw it. This is a deeply symbolic event. Human beings cannot stand in God’s perspective. However, only by being lifted up by Jesus—and only at that moment—can we see the same world as Jesus Christ. In Christianity, separation from God is called sin, and union with God is called salvation. This means that salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ.

©The Church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14-26)

Paul compares the church to a single body. At the time this letter was written, a dispute had arisen within the church in Corinth. There were several believers in the Corinthian church who were particularly vocal and seemed especially outstanding. As a result, the atmosphere made it somewhat uncomfortable for believers who had joined the church later—and who, at first glance, did not seem as outstanding—to be there. Outstanding believers versus those who aren’t quite as outstanding. It’s a pretty raw topic, isn’t it? After all, when there are people who play the organ skillfully, are good at managing finances, or are adept at synthesizing everyone’s opinions in board meetings and committees, we sometimes find ourselves wondering, “What kind of gift do I actually have?” We might even think, “Maybe I don’t have anything at all.” It’s human nature to think things like, “That person is great, but I’m small,” or “That person is actually pretty small too, so compared to them, I’m still a bit bigger.” As for me, from everyone’s perspective, I might seem to be doing a fine job as a “pastor,” but when I listen to Pastor Inoue’s powerful, energetic sermons every week, I think, “Oh, I can’t do that—I have nothing to offer.” When I view the world through this lens of comparing myself to others, I end up thinking that Pastor Inoue is an outstanding member of the congregation, while I’m not quite up to par. But that’s just our human way of thinking—it stems from our desire to be great and to grow.

The word “gift” is translated as “gift” in English. It is a gift from God. Some gifts are easy to recognize, while others may seem less obvious at first glance. Nevertheless, everyone has received a gift from God. And Paul says that it is only when we include even those who, at first glance, make us wonder what kind of gift they might have, that a single church is finally formed. You are a part of the body. He teaches that if even one part—whether an eye, an ear, a hand, a foot, or even a single finger—were missing, the church would cease to be the body of Christ; everyone is important and is a part that makes up the body of Christ. It’s not that the pastor is superior. It’s simply that the pastor is a prominent part. Nor is it that church officers are superior while others are not. Paul teaches that everyone is equally a precious being who cannot be missing.

On a personal note, I had a tooth pulled about two weeks ago. The cavity had gotten so bad that I had to have the tooth extracted and replaced with an implant. After the extraction, the pain became really intense. It’s not just the extraction site that hurts—my gums and jaw hurt too. I can’t open my mouth very wide, and the pain makes it impossible to chew food. The toothache is so severe that it even gives me a headache. I have no appetite, and if I don’t eat, my mind goes blank and I start to feel sluggish. The pain keeps me awake at night, too. When I don’t get enough sleep, my whole body starts to feel off, and I feel constantly fatigued even during the day, which

really interferes with my daily life. It's not just the tooth that hurts. Something as small as a single tooth can have such a huge impact on my body.

This is a common story I hear among people my age. For example, suppose there's someone struggling with a difficult job and wavering about whether to quit. But they worry that quitting would be a burden on others, or that quitting now would be irresponsible. A phrase often used in such situations is, "Even if you're the only one who quits, the company will still manage to keep going as usual the very next day." It implies, "There are plenty of others to take your place." Or, "Even if one person dies, the world will keep turning just the same the next day." That may certainly be true. But the Body of Christ is not like that. The Church is not like that. (Here, "the Church" does not refer to a specific local congregation, but to the Church in the broadest sense—the global community gathered by Christ.) Jesus is saying that it hurts. Even if just one tooth is lost, it hurts. It's not just the spot where the tooth was pulled that hurts—your head aches, you can't eat, the pain keeps you awake, and your whole body feels weak. Jesus is telling us that losing even one of you causes Him that much anguish. That's how much Jesus needs each and every one of us—we are all precious parts of Him.

©The Little Christ

I had an experience like this at the church I used to attend. There was a person who started coming to the church because they knew someone who was a member—it was around the time they'd quit their job after things weren't going well. I think they must have been depressed around the time they quit; their eating habits were haphazard, and they seemed to find even taking a bath or going to the bathroom too much trouble to manage. Since they didn't bathe, they naturally had a certain odor. Their clothes were dirty, too. To be honest, I think most people would prefer not to get too close to someone like that or even touch them.

But I believe that it is precisely these people—who are naturally kept at a distance—who actually reflect Christ. While everyone else longs to be a great figure, this person had given up on becoming great or important. He had become smaller and smaller than anyone else. And I was reminded of these words from the Gospel of Matthew: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." These are Jesus' words. I realized that in Jewish society at that time, accepting small children—and, for me, accepting that person whose entire body was covered in filth—was precisely what it meant to accept Christ, to accept God.

At some point, that person began standing in front of the church even on weekdays, calling out to passersby—regardless of who they were—"Come to church," "Come to the bazaar," "Come for Christmas." When I saw this, I initially thought that doing such a thing might make people think, "A strange person is talking to me; I'd better stay away," or "Church seems scary." Since there are many people in Japan who think religion is scary, I myself am not the type to be overly aggressive about it. However, inviting someone to "come to church" is the very basics—the first step in evangelism. Seeing him like that, I suddenly thought, "Ah, Jesus is right here." This man was the "little Christ" I had encountered. It was an encounter that made me realize Jesus was actually very close by.

It may sound cliché, but I decided to be kind to him. That experience taught me that while I can be kind, it's actually quite difficult to love someone from the bottom of my heart. It was also a moment when I realized my own foolishness—that even as a Christian, and a pastor at that, I was unable to love my neighbor. I think that as long as I was struggling, thinking, "I have to love this person—what should I do, what should I do?" there was a part of my heart that wanted to feel superior. I was thinking, "I'm so admirable for being able to love this person!" Then it suddenly occurred to me: both this person and I are precious human beings loved by God. I might not be able to love this person, but God already loves them. The moment I realized that, my heart felt at ease.

©When We Realize Our Own Smallness

There were disputes and arguments within the church in Corinth. There were also disputes between the church and Paul. In every era and in every church, differences of opinion are inevitable. That's because we are human beings. There are people we don't like, people we can't get along with, and people we find hard to approach. Since we are dealing with human beings, this is only natural. Even so, there is one thing we must never forget: "Even this person I find difficult is a precious human being in God's eyes, and this person is also receiving God's love." This is Paul's message. And it is the teaching of Christ that is spoken to us as well.

We humans cannot possibly love everyone. After all, we are not God. Yet, we still find ourselves wishing not to be disliked by others, or wanting to be great or important—even though we are not God. When we come into contact with Jesus' call—that everyone is needed—and with God's immense love, do we not become aware of our own smallness as beings incapable of loving others? When we realize that we are, in fact, powerless and weak beings, is it not then that we are given the faith to entrust everything to Jesus—just like the child who was lifted up by Him, submitting completely? And when we come to know that we can do nothing on our own—that we are weak and powerless beings incapable even of loving others—when we realize how small we truly are—it is at that moment that we realize the child lifted up by Jesus before the disciples was, in fact, ourselves. We are made to share in the view of the one and only great One, Jesus Christ. When we truly become small, we are made one with God through Christ. Only then do we truly become great. Only then are we deemed valuable. Rather than comparing ourselves to others—thinking, "That person is great, and I am small"—I want to be someone who simply stands before God and contemplates my own smallness in the presence of the God who bestows unfathomable, great love.