

8-13-09

Those Who Follow Christ at a Distance

Mark 8:27-38

Yesterday has been lived. Tomorrow is still unborn. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Today we are walking forward toward the future, expecting a better life than we have lived. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. We take that first step from where we are now. Everyday, we need to start over. Reaffirmation and redirection need to be adjusted.

Today's scripture reading, Mark 8:27-38, is a conversation between Jesus our Lord and His disciples. They were headed to Jerusalem. On the way of our life journey, let us join the walk that Jesus and his disciples were walking, and adjust to our steps to match theirs. I found at least three steps needed to adjust our walk with Jesus in the scriptures. To be a true Christian, we need to take steps forward in at least these three stages.

The first step is the knowing stage. Knowledge of God is, of course, important but at the same time, knowing ourselves is important as well. Socrates, the Greek philosopher, said a long, long time ago, "Know thyself!" We all understand Dwight Moody, when he said, "I have had more trouble with myself than with any other person I have ever met." We are problems to ourselves. Every living person is handicapped and limited in some way.

The Christian pilgrimage begins with an honest recognition of who and what and where we are. You know what your problems are. You know where your abilities are limited. You know what you have or have not. To know one's self is wisdom. A true knowing of one's self is knowing to whom one is meaningfully related.

In scripture this morning, Jesus is nearly ready to head toward that showdown in Jerusalem. He decides to check out the progress of his disciples. Do they really understand what's happening? Do they really understand what awaits them in Jerusalem and beyond? Do they really understand who he is? Jesus stops on his way and asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" He asks to his disciples this crucial question.

Jesus was no ordinary rabbi, and he did not ask the question simply to get information. He used it as a prelude to his second question. The answers were different. The answers all reflect an inadequate view of Christ. They relied, "Someone say, John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." It is surprising that the disciples do not report that anyone said that Jesus was the Messiah, especially since the demons recognized who he was and said so publicly.

Jesus now directs the question at the disciples, "But what about you?" "Who do you say I am?" In other words, "Who do you think I am?" Peter had a ready answer, "You are the

Christ.” Jesus then says this: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Knowing what you believe is more important than knowing what others believe. A tradition in most Korean churches is to have the names of those who have given an offering to the church the previous Sunday printed on the back page of each Sunday bulletin. It is like a public receipt of giving for each Sunday. The lists of givers are listed according to the type of offering, such as: tithe, weekly pledge, thanksgiving for special occasions like weddings, birthdays, admission to college, promotion etc. So, everyone in the congregation knows who the givers and non-givers are. Though the practice of publishing Sunday giving in such an explicit way certainly poses some burdens and discomfort, in some ways, it is good to know who the givers are in the church because giving is quite related to one’s faith and commitment to God. Certainly, money is not the only way of giving as a response to one’s faith and commitment to God. However, lip-service is not enough for worship.

At my previous church, one Sunday after worship, a young lady came to see me in my office. She said to me, “Pastor, I will not tithe anymore.” I asked her if she has any reason to stop her tithe. She lived in small apartment with her husband and two children. Her husband supported them, who was a part-time student and worked part-time. The young woman named a few members of the church, who seemed better off than she was. She said, “These other people are richer than we are. They have fancy cars, always wear expensive clothes, and are in important leadership positions in our church. And still, I see that they do not tithe. Why should I tithe, given my living situation?” I said to her, “Even though you are not as well off as these others, you are richer than they are in faith and commitment to God. Keep your faith and commitment, then, and God will bless you in visible and invisible ways.” Later, she became a minister. Know yourself and where your faith is. Then, step forward. Knowing yourself is the way of finding your integrity. Whoever walks in integrity walks securely. (Proverbs 10:9)

The Second step is the trusting stage. Peter had an excellent commendation from Jesus when he answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.” It seems like a grade of A+ for Peter! But, three verses later, in verse 33, Jesus rebuked Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus said, “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Peter’s confession was not enough. He got flunked this time. Peter didn’t know the cross that the Lord always considered in his mind.

Christian faith is rooted in the event of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus is not only the content of what we confess of our faith, but also the affirmation of transformation and new life. Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Have you heard this story of a lady who was dismayed to hear that her mother-in-law has publicly announced the lady’s sin to her church congregation? There is a story about a

young woman who was newly married and living with her husband's family. She was a good Christian, and also devoted to her husband's family. So, her husband's family husband loved her so much and was interested in the daughter-in-law's religion. She led her mother-in-law to church and guided her to be a Christian.

After some time, the mother-in-law was ready to be baptized in the church. The daughter-in-law guided and advised her mother-in-law as to how to prepare for her baptism. She taught her, "When you are asked by the pastor, 'By whose sin was the Lord Jesus crucified and died?' then you should answer, 'By my sin, the Lord was crucified and died.'" The mother-in-law memorized the answer that her daughter-in-law taught her..

Right before being baptized, the pastor asked the expected question, "By whose sin was the Lord Jesus crucified and died?" The mother-in-law answered, "My daughter-in-law said that it was by her sin, Jesus our Lord, was crucified and died."

The pastor expected a confession of faith, but the lady pronounced a confession of her daughter-in-law's sin. That is not the answer the pastor expected! What is your faith? What is your response to your faith? How do you affirm your faith in action? A faith by referral is not enough.

Faith is expressed in the steps taken by one's own two feet. We cannot walk with another person's feet, or another person's faith. The feet of faith support our body of life.

The last stage is the following stage. The last stage is a blessed stage of Christian life. Of course, it is hardest stage in Christian life. The Bible says, "For it not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." (Romans 2:13)

Here is an exaggerated episode. A man called a hospital expecting to talk to the receptionist. An answering machine recording picked up, saying, "If you are an internal patient, push number one; external patients, push number two." So, he pushed number two because he had a headache. Then, the answering machine said, "If you are an upper-body patient, push number one; lower-body patients, push number two." So, he pushed number two. And then the machine answered again, "If you are male push number one; females push number two." So, he pushed number one. The machine was still answering, and said, "If this is an emergency, push number one; otherwise, push number two." Since his headache was not that serious, he pushed number two. Finally, the machine said, "Since you are not a serious patient, please push number one." So he pushed number one and the answering machine said, "Doctors are not available until next two month, Good bye!"

The machine actually didn't help the patient at all. One time, I shared my experience that I had a phone call from a lady who needed help. And, some said that we have many places to refer in such cases. Yes, I know that there are many places: shelters, Salvation Army, social service agencies, or big churches. Referral to other place, however, often can result in no help at all.

There is an interesting story about Peter, and why he failed in a crucial moment while he was sitting in the courtyard. He denied the Lord three times, saying, "I don't know him at all."

The scripture describes how Peter acted when Jesus was captured and dragged by soldiers into the courtyard. "Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But, Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome." (Matthew 26:57-58)

Are you following Jesus closely or at a distance? Are you carrying your cross to follow Jesus? If you know who you are, you will know what to do. The cross is not only a symbol of salvation, but also a privilege to carry for the glory of God. Jesus told to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34) "If anyone is ashamed of me, the Son of man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

When I asked, "Where is your cross?" while the preaching once in a Korean church, a lady showed me her gold necklace, on which hung a cross. I told her, your cross is not what hangs on your neck. It is something to be carried on your back!" Then she replied, "Pastor, sometimes my necklace-cross gets turned around and ends up on my back!"

We all have our own cross. Children, parents, jobs, or responsibilities are one's cross to carry. I believe that where there is a cross, there is glory and blessing. Some carry their pain or trouble as their cross. Let's support one another, carrying our cross and following Christ closer and closer.

The scripture said, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." May the Lord bless you, brothers and sisters, who carry your cross for family, friends, church, and for others and bestow rewards.