

Matthew 20:20-28

“Servant”

In the last three years, I have greatly enjoyed serving at Grace City Church. The staff meeting as been a meaningful time of sharing about God's Word and our lives, as well as our vision. I am motivated through praying together.

However, recently on my way home from staff meeting, I experienced a lack of joy, a lack of passion. "What's going on?" I thought. "What has happened to the joy I had till now?"

It wasn't the fault of the staff. For me, the staff meeting is a place of refreshment. It's a place where I can share anything and be prayed for. Of course there are things to coordinate and decide, but because we have mutual trust, we can do that well. So, why didn't I have joy?

The next morning, I read the first three verses of Psalm 73. "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

Was it envy? Was I envying those who are successful? Was I envying those who are praised? Just as Israel was chosen by God, I am chosen by God to be his child. Jesus has called me to be his disciple, and to make disciples. I am a part of a mission, a church, a family that loves me. Why can't I have joy in that? Why can't I be satisfied in that?

Tim Keller says, "The power of envy is such that it made even the Garden of Eden feel like it wasn't enough." Even though Eden was perfect, Adam and Eve were not satisfied and gave in to the temptation of the devil to eat from the forbidden tree. They believed Satan's lie that God wasn't enough and that God was limiting their freedom. They believed Satan's lie that they would become like God if they ate from the tree.

This tendency has existed ever since then. Even though we are loved by God, we tend to feel as if we are not. And so, we try to earn God's love. We try to earn people's love.

The mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John), came with her sons to Jesus and kneeling before him, she asked for something. Jesus said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom."

This event happened about a week before Jesus went to the cross. So imagine the scene of Jesus and his disciples and some women walking toward Jerusalem. Jesus had told them what would happen to him. He would be turned over to the Gentile leaders, mocked,

whipped and put on a cross. But, after three days he would rise again. He had told them this.

Why did James' and John's mother make this request? Likely, they thought that if Jesus was the Messiah and King, then they wanted to be next to him and have a position of authority like he did. They wanted to be rewarded for their sacrifice. They had walked with Jesus for three years, so wasn't it time for their graduation.

Actually, another disciple, Peter, at the end of the previous chapter, says to Jesus, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Peter too, is focusing on the reward, the entitlement of following Jesus. Somehow, in the time that they have been with Jesus, they have lost the joy of just being with him. They feel that they deserved to receive from him.

Jesus' answer to Peter is that they would receive a hundred times as much as they gave, plus eternal life.

I'm sure you know the story of the Prodigal Son. But do you know the story about his older brother that follows? After the younger son had engaged in wild living and spent all of his inheritance, and was feeding pigs for a living, he came to realize the abundance of his father's house. At the same time, he realized the emptiness of his own life. He went back to his home and to his father and said, "I don't deserve to be called your son. Make me a hired servant." His father replied, "Quick! Put the best robe on him, a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Kill the fat calf. Let's celebrate!"

Meanwhile, the older son was working in the field, and he heard the noise of the celebration. He asked one of the servants about it. The servant said, "Your brother has returned home, and so they have killed the fat calf and are celebrating." When he heard this, the older son was not happy, and he did not go into the house.

His father came out to him and tried to encourage him. But his son said, "All these years I've worked for you and have obeyed everything you told me to do. In spite of that, I never got a celebration like this, that you are giving for your son who spent his inheritance on wild living."

His father said to him, "My son, I am always with you. Everything I have is yours. But this son of mine, your brother was dead, but now is alive, he was lost, but now he is found. Is it not right for us to celebrate?"

The older brother was jealous of his younger brother, but actually he had everything his brother did. He had his father's love, his inheritance, his presence, his acceptance. He was just taking that for granted, and so there wasn't joy in it.

We tend to lose sight of how much we have in Jesus and that he is enough for us.

And so Jesus has to remind James and John and their mother that positions and authority and entitlement is not important. Actually, He could not give them what they were asking for. "You do not know what you are asking for." The father of the prodigal son probably wanted to tell his son that. "You don't know what you are asking for?" But he didn't say that. He let his son experience the emptiness of his choice. Jesus continued, "Can you drink this cup that I am about the drink?" The cross was only a week away. The cup indicates trials and suffering.

James and John answered, "We can." They said that without knowing at all what was coming. We know now that James was killed by King Herod. We know now that John was exiled to the island of Patmos, because of his testimony for Jesus.

It is good that we don't know what is coming. But I think what Jesus is saying is: There are more important things than knowing what is going to happen to you.

Actually, the most important thing for them to know was what was going to happen to Jesus. He had just told them that he would be captured, beaten, mocked and crucified. But three days later, he would rise from the dead.

In order to be Jesus's disciple, his death and resurrection was the most important thing for them to know.

Unfortunately, they and we now, are more concerned about our position and about our entitlement and our authority. In fact, the other ten disciples were really upset at James and John for making this request of Jesus.

So Jesus used this quarrel as an opportunity to teach them a lesson on leadership and serving, 25-28.

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus drank our cup of suffering. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection gives us hope and healing. It is enough for our joy.

Recently, I went to Yachimata in Chiba, and preached at a church there that has connections with our mission. From April, they have called a new pastor, who is the son of

our former language teacher. Thirty years ago when he was ten years old, we went to the same church.

Masamichi grew up and went to work for Aoyama clothing store for about ten years. He got really tired out in that job. He decided to go to Tokyo Christian University. Upon his graduation, he looked for a church where he could serve. He was not able to find one. So for two years he volunteered at a disability support center. Through that he said, I learned that the meaning of life is not whether I succeed in my job, the meaning of life is that I can live."

I met Masamichi, and he said to me, "When you go preach at a church, can I go with you. I want to learn from you." "Wow, I thought, "This is a disciple." I prayed, "Lord, help me." I took him with me to a SEND church. I introduced him to SEND missionaries, and also to Fukuda San. Then we went to Yachimata Church. The pastor there moved quickly to recommend him as a pastoral candidate to the church. And so, from April of this year, he has become their pastor.

I preached on these verses there, and afterwards, he summarized my message this way.

"Through your message, I learned that our serving in the church is not only serving, but God gives us joy through it. Jesus showed us through the cross how to serve and he created in us the joy of our salvation that gives us the desire to serve." I don't remember saying it like that. It's God's joy, not ours. Through Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection, joy is created. "The joy of your salvation."

Psalms 51:12 "Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."

There is no need for me to be jealous of others, or to doubt Jesus, when I already have salvation in him. When I start to pray to him, he fills me with his Spirit, gives me guidance and takes away my fears. Let us begin to pray. By yourself, with someone else, those online as well. If you don't know how to pray, just say, "Lord, show me yourself. I want to know you."