The Spirituality of the Cross

Last week, through Luke’s gospel study, we learned that God invited us to put out into deep water and let down our nets for a catch. Putting out into deep water means deepening our spirituality through our personal encounter with Christ Jesus. Peter met Jesus through his obedience and realization of himself as a sinner. Before he met Jesus, Peter lived in shallow world with only his knowledge, experiences, and common sense. Life in a shallow world made him tired, dissatisfied, and directionless. Jesus loved Peter and challenged him to go into deep water for a catch. It was not easy for Peter to obey Jesus’ word. But, when he denied himself and obeyed Jesus’ words, he experienced a miracle, not only catching lots of fish, but also meeting the Holy God in Jesus. He found himself as a sinner before the Holy God. So he confessed, “*Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man*!” (Lk 5:8) Self realization as a sinner before God is the first stage of entering into a deep spiritual world.

Today’s passage is the continuation of deepening our spirituality in Jesus. God gave me the privilege of joining a spirituality seminar which was held last week in Charlotte NC. I want to share what I learned and what enlightened me most, especially the spirituality of the cross lectured by Rev. Myung Hyuk Kim. The cross is the symbol of Jesus’ crucifixion and of Christianity. Coming near the cross is like putting out into deep water. Knowing the meaning of the cross is deepening our spirituality through our encounter with Jesus Christ.

First, the spirituality of the cross lies in weakness and foolishness. These words sound paradoxical. We think that Christians must be strong with the cross of Jesus. The Roman Emperor Constantine marched with the banner of the cross when he fought against his enemies. The Crusades also did so, and Oliver Cromwell also put the banner of the cross ahead of his army. Nevertheless, the characteristic of the cross is weakness and foolishness. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18a, “*For the message of the cross is foolishness*…” “*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.*” (1:27) In the eyes of the world, Jesus lived a weak and foolish life. He was born in a manger as the son of a poor carpenter. He lived without a house. He said, “*Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*.” (Mt 8:20) He was rejected and despised and was even betrayed by his own disciples. As the Prophet Isaiah said, he became a man of sorrow and familiar with sufferings. (Isa 53:3) He suffered and died on the cross. The cross was the most painful and cruelest execution which human beings have ever invented. Naked, crushed, and abandoned, Christ Jesus was hung on the tree. The cross is the emblem of shame, suffering, and condemnation.

The Apostle Paul understood the characteristic of the cross. So he said in 1 Corinthians 2:3, “*I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling*.” He also said, “*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness*.” (2 Co11:30) “…*but I will not boast about myself, except my weaknesses.*” (2 Co 12:5) As we have studied in the book of Acts, Paul’s character was strong. He never compromised and never gave up for the truth of the gospel. Once he was almost stoned to death in Lystra, but he got up and went into the city again to preach the gospel. What did he mean when he boasts about his weakness? He answered in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. “*But he (Jesus) said to me, “****My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.****” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*”

What does it mean that we become strong when we are weak? How can we become strong through our weakness? When we are weak, we become strong in Jesus. In other words, when we become weak, Christ’s power rests on us. We turn our eyes upon Jesus and rely on him. Our weakness draws us near to the cross. Our weakness is comforted by the cross of Jesus. When we kneel down beneath the cross, we experience unutterable joy and strength which come from the cross of Jesus; forgiveness, healing, and hope. Fanny Crosby became blind when she was young. Her life could have been full of sorrow and misery. But Fanny came to the cross of Jesus. She found her new self beneath the cross. In the cross her spiritual eyes were opened. She wrote the hymn, “Near the Cross” and said, “*Jesus keep me near the cross. There a precious fountain, Free to all, a healing stream, Flows from Calvry’s mountain. In the cross, in the cross, Be my glory ever, till my raptured soul find, Rest beyond the river*.” In July 2007 in Keswick Convention in England, Rev. Dr. John Stott addressed his final message, titled, “Power through Weakness.” He said, “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I turn to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me. He set aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death.”

Is there anyone here in deep sorrow, suffering, and pain? Come to the cross and look at Jesus. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Is there anyone who feels weak and down? Come to the cross of Jesus and look at Him. In church history Christians have been regarded as weak and foolish people. Stephen did not resist when the angry mob was stoning him. He just prayed for them and died, praising the Lord. Many Christians were thrown into the den of lions and died at the stake. Pilgrims were rejected and persecuted by the English church and came to the new land, America, for the freedom of worshiping God. Almost half of them died within a year before and after they arrived in America. When they were weak and suffered, they knelt down and cried out to God. They all came to the cross of Jesus. In the cross they were comforted. In the cross they were strengthened. God blessed our forefathers’ faith and prayer. God made America the biggest Christian country of the 20th century. When churches in Korea were weak and poor, they came to the cross and prayed with many tears. They were comforted and strengthened in the cross of Jesus. But these days, people are strong and rich. They stop coming to the cross. Their tears are dry. The cross of Jesus is an accessory. The message of the cross disappears in sermons in church. We need to restore the cross of Jesus in our lives. We admit our weaknesses and sinfulness and come to Jesus. We need to restore self-realization before the cross of Jesus. We have to confess, like Peter who said, “Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man!” We must follow the good spiritual heritage of our forefathers, who understood and boasted the way of the cross. May God help us not to despair or be ashamed of our weakness, poverty, suffering, but come to the cross of Jesus and meet Jesus in tears and prayer. Amen!

Second, the spirituality of the cross lies in goodness. John 1:14 says, “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us…*” This verse describes that Jesus became a man of goodness even though he is God himself. The goodness of Jesus starts with selflessness. Jesus became selfless in order to come into this world. He left the glory and throne of heaven as God and appeared as a man. A good man is a selfless man who sacrifices himself for others’ sake. Jesus lived a selfless life. He served all kinds of sick and helpless people day and night. He touched a leper and healed him, saying, “Be clean!” Jesus risked his life and healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. He humbled himself and washed his disciple’s feet, including Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. Even though he was sinless, he became the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (Jn 1:29) Finally he took the cross and shed his blood for the sins of the world.

We can see God’s goodness in the cross of Jesus. Here God’s goodness does not necessarily mean moral goodness in human respect, but faithfulness and truthfulness in redemptive respect. As the Apostle Paul said, there is righteousness, holiness, and redemption in the cross of Jesus. (1 Cor 1:30) These days the words, “The Lord is good. And his love endures forever,” echo in my heart. Our God is good, absolutely good. What was God’s word after he created all things in six days? He said, “It was good!” He said “It was very good!” after he created man in his own image and likeness. The good Lord God created the Garden of Eden (joy) for man’s happiness and established a family and blessed them. When men fell into sin, he promised them to send the Messiah as the offspring of a woman. He covered men’s nakedness and preserved the tree of life for their eternal life. He called a hopeless old man Abraham and promised to make him a great nation. As he had promised, God made Abraham into a great nation and a blessing to the whole world through his descendant Jesus Christ. The Lord God heard the outcry of his people in Egypt and brought them out from Pharaoh and led them to the Promised Land. He fed them with manna in the desert for forty years. Whenever the Israelites rebelled against him and worshiped idols, with great patience and compassion the Lord God helped them to repent and turn to him. Finally he sent his One and Only Son Jesus for the sins of the world. The Bible story tells us how our God revealed his selfless and sacrificial love toward his people. His goodness and faithfulness followed them all the time. King David sang a song in Psalm 23:6, “*Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life*…”

The cross of Jesus is the culmination of God’s goodness. In the cross of Jesus we restore our original image of God. In the cross, our anger, hatred, bitterness, sorrow, fear, and all wickedness and evil melt away like snow. In the cross of Jesus we become a new creation, a new self, who can do what God planned for us to do before the creation of the world. Jesus said to his disciples, “*You are the light of the world….In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven*.” (Mt 5:14,16) The Apostle Paul encouraged the saints in the Galatia Church, “*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*.” (Gal 6:9) A few years ago, Shepherd Ben West and I visited a memorial church of the Rev. Yang Won Sohn in Korea. Rev. Sohn lived a good and selfless life for the despised and abandoned, especially lepers in Korea. He served lepers like his own children. He even sucked oozing pus from a leper’s leg with his mouth. He became a good shepherd for the lepers. Jesus said, *“I am a good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*” (Jn 10:11) His two sons were killed by a communist soldier. But he did not condemn the murderer. Instead, he forgave him and adopted him as his own son, who later became a pastor. American and Canadian missionaries in the end of 19th century lived selfless life for Bible Korea. They shed their blood on the land of Korea and were buried in the missionary tomb called “Yang Hwa Jin” in Seoul Korea. They lived like Jesus, the good shepherd. The seeds which they planted in the land of Korea grew, blossomed, and bore fruits, fruits of life which covered all the Korean Peninsula within a century. Christians are good people. We are humble, meek, kind, and selfless. We follow Jesus because Jesus died on the cross. I believe that all good works which we are doing in the name of Jesus will be recorded and rewarded in heaven. Our spiritual maturity will grow when we become more like Jesus.

Third, the spirituality of the cross lies in witness. Christianity is not a religion only for the Jews, but for the whole world. Christ died for the sins of the world, not only for the people around him. God’s redemptive work is universal, not local. So Christianity breaks barriers of race, nationality, and culture, and makes the whole world one in God’s redemption. This is why Jesus commanded his disciples to go to the whole world and preach the gospel to all nations. Jesus said, “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations*,…” (Mt 28:18) *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*.” (Ac 1:8) Jesus commanded his disciples to go to the end of the earth. When Jesus was born, the angel announced to the shepherds in a field, ‘*Do not be afraid. I will bring you good news of great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord*.” (Luke 2:10,11) God sent the Messiah Jesus to save the whole world, not only for myself, my family, my people and my nation.

After Simon Peter met Jesus and experienced God’s presence in him, what did Jesus say to Peter? Jesus said, “*Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men (you will fish for people)*.” Jesus didn’t say, ‘Okay, Peter. I will make you a successful fisherman.” But he said, “I will make you a fisher of men.” Jesus called Peter to be witness of his love and power. Our spirituality grows in obeying Jesus command. Christianity is not a theory or theology, but a testimony. Many heroes and heroines of faith in church history left their beautiful testimonies. They were killed while they were testifying to the love and power of Jesus. In Jesus’ time the word “witness” means “martyr.” They sacrificed their lives in testifying and witnessing to Jesus. Simon Peter followed Jesus and experienced a deep spiritual world, more than just catching lots of fish. He entered into the spiritual world of the cross. He understood and appreciated Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. In the past, he feared suffering. But after he followed Jesus, he rejoiced in the sufferings. (1 Pe 4:13)

There are people who hesitate to go into deep water. They remain in shallow water, worrying and calculating the cost of entering the deep water. They know that coming near the cross is the way to meet Jesus, but they don’t want to kneel down before Jesus. They are still strong, wise, and rich. They are men of theory or theology, not of obedience. But those who come to Jesus and kneel down before him experience healing grace, gentleness, humility, and the presence of God. They are truly brave and wise men in the sight of God. I pray that we may continue to grow in the image of Christ and our spirituality may deepen every day through our obedience and perseverance. Amen!