

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Those Ready to Receive the Gift

Lesson: Mark 10:13-16

I don't remember the exact year, but before I came to the U.S., I spent some time with my dad during a hot and humid summer in Korea. It was one of those summers where the heat drains your energy and makes you lose the will to do anything. After lunch, my dad, trying to digest the meal, stood near the window, doing some light walking in place on a foot massage mat. Then, as if something occurred to him, he said, "Sometimes I feel like that tree over there." So, I asked him, "Why?" And he responded, "That tree is stretching its arms toward the sky, just waiting for rain in the midst of this heat."

At the time, I didn't fully understand what he meant. But now, looking back, I think I have a better grasp of his words. I've never seen a time when my family was financially well-off while I was growing up. In particular, when my dad left his company to follow his calling into ministry and entered seminary, we always faced financial difficulties. After he graduated, completed the ordination process, and became an ordained Elder, he planted a church called Sae-Won (세원) Methodist Church, which means "World Salvation."

The system of the United Methodist Church (UMC) and the Korean Methodist Church is quite different. As I understand it, in the UMC, when a church is planted, the Conference provides financial support, including a minimum salary, until the church or ministry becomes self-sustaining. But in Korea, there's no set minimum salary, and there isn't specific Conference support for newly planted churches. This means that when a pastor plants a church, they are responsible for their own salary, the church rent, utilities, and everything else.

Imagine the first Sunday worship of this new church plant. When the church doors open, do you think people would hear about it and come to worship, become members, and give offerings? No, not at all. In the beginning, only my grandma, my mom, and I were in the sanctuary for worship. For a while, we worshiped together like that. My dad served that church from 2006 until

2018. While there were some changes, there weren't any dramatic transformations. During that time, my dad focused entirely on ministry, while my mom occasionally worked part-time jobs. But how my family managed to survive financially during those years remains a mystery to me. I believe it was purely by God's grace.

My parents spent a lot of time in prayer. My dad, in particular, would stay at the church all day, reading the Bible, praying, and going out into the streets to evangelize. I think when my dad looked at that tree and said he felt like it, he didn't share everything he was going through. But I believe he was facing various life and ministry struggles. Like the tree stretching its arms toward the sky, waiting for rain, all he could do was pray and wait for God's help.

But do you know the difference between a tree that grows in a drought and one that grows in a place with plenty of water? Trees that grow in water-abundant areas don't develop deep roots because they don't need to; they can easily get water. But a tree that has experienced drought sends its roots deep into the ground in search of water to survive. These deep, strong roots allow the tree to withstand strong winds or any other forces that come its way.

In this sense, our faith journey is similar to that of a tree. I'm sure no one here enjoys going through life's difficulties. I certainly don't want to face hardships or suffering if I can avoid them. But even if we don't want them, life's challenges come our way. And if we think about when we seek God and pray the most, it's often during the tough times when we realize there's nothing more we can do on our own. We don't fervently pray about problems we can solve by ourselves because we don't need God's help for those. But when we reach a point where we feel like all we can do is pray, that's when we fall to our knees before God, and our faith roots grow deeper and stronger in Jesus Christ.

The more we go through life's droughts, trials, and hardships, the deeper our faith roots grow in Christ. No matter how strong the winds of life may blow, we won't lose hope. Instead, we find hope in Christ and live with that hope today and into the future.

In today's story from Mark 10, we see people bringing their little children to Jesus to bless them, but the disciples were preventing the children from coming. At that time, Jesus was already very famous, and many people gathered to hear His teachings, so He was very busy. And children weren't regarded as important; they were often seen as a burden in many ways.

This attitude was understandable at the time because religious achievements were highly valued under the influence of the Pharisees. In their legalistic worldview, religious devotion was measured by how well one kept the law. For example, how long someone prayed or how many times they fasted in a day became the standard of faith. Children, who couldn't strictly follow such rules, had little to offer in terms of religious achievement and were often seen as a nuisance.

However, Jesus took a different stance. He embraced the children, placed His hands on them, and blessed them, saying, "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

Why did Jesus bless the children and say that the kingdom of God belongs to them? Aren't you curious? It's because children receive everything they need—whether it's food or clothing—as gifts from their parents. What they have is not something they earned by working for it; it's something given to them by their parents or guardians. Children are ready to receive everything as a gift. At that time, society valued religious achievements, and many believed that the kingdom of God was for those who strictly observed the law. To belong to the kingdom of God meant achieving it through one's effort and devotion.

But Jesus challenged that notion. He said that the kingdom of God isn't something we earn through our efforts or buy with money. Rather, it belongs to those who, like children, are ready to receive it as a precious gift.

In church or during worship, we often hear the term "sinner." Some people might feel uncomfortable with that word because they associate it with moral failure. But being a sinner doesn't mean we've broken some moral law. It means that before Jesus came into our lives, we were in a state that wasn't good, and we couldn't improve our condition on our own. We needed

someone's help to make things better. And for that reason, Jesus came into our lives as a gift. Therefore, when we say, "We are sinners," it means we are debtors to God.

According to the Mark 10 story, those who, like little children, are ready to receive God's grace as a gift. I also believe that those who, like a tree in the scorching heat of life's difficulties, stretch their arms toward heaven, relying only on God's help, and those who, in life's storms, realize they can do nothing on their own and fall before God in prayer are ready to receive God's grace as a gift.

God came as a gift for those who need help in life, for those who have nothing, for those who have no power. When we receive Jesus Christ as a gift, and when we cherish and love one another as gifts sent by God—whether it's spouses, parents, children, or everyone gathered here today—I believe that we take one more step toward the kingdom of God. Amen.