

Peace – The Mission of the Church

Matthew 5:38-48

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43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers,⁹ what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

What does it mean to be a Christian today, that is, at this point in history?

There is no other question more serious than this one for us Christians nowadays. Through their hard work and dedication, Christians have left their indisputable footprints on Korean society. The missionaries suffered from great difficulties and hardship when they came to Korea to spread the Gospel. It was during the period of the Japanese colonial aggression into the Korean Peninsula, and thus the time of much political turmoil and economic impoverishment.

The Reverend Underwood, the first Presbyterian missionary who came to Korea at that time, is said to have had four prayers of petition. First, establishment and growth of the churches so that they could spread the Gospel. Second, establishment of hospitals for the sick. Third, founding of schools to nurture and raise the future leaders, and fourth, economic development to help Koreans overcome poverty.

Now, after 130 years, there are churches everywhere throughout Korea. There are numerous Christian universities not just Yonsei University and Ewha Woman’s University, and there are Christian hospitals everywhere including the Severance Hospital. The Republic of Korea is now the tenth largest economy in the world. We could easily say, then, that all of the prayers of Rev. Underwood have been answered.

Thanks to these historic legacies, Korean churches now exert great influences on the Korean society. From this perspective, Korean Christians living today may justifiably feel great pride in their spiritual heritage.

The real challenge, however, is what we as Korean Christians would need to do from now on.

If the Korean Church is so tied up to the past and only boast about its past contributions, and is just so self-satisfied with its phenomenal growth and prosperity, people will get fed up with such a Church very soon. Instead, the Church has to hear its new calling from God at this historical juncture, put forward the new vision for a compelling future and become the living faith community actively realizing this vision.

What, then, is the new calling, the new historic mission of the Church that we have to dedicate ourselves to?

Despite the enormous progress that Korea has made, there is still one unresolved problem paralyzing Korean society, something that we really have to overcome before we could further progress into the future. It is the problem of the division in Korean Peninsula.

The division over such a long period of time may have become a routinized normalcy for many, and to them it may no longer be thought of as a problem; but, the division has actually become a big obstacle to further development on the Korean peninsula, and has caused and compounded many other problems in Korea.

The casualty and the destruction during the Korean War was especially detrimental and harmful for the Korean people. It was a fratricidal tragedy, leading also to an exacerbation of international conflicts. More bombs than the ones dropped on the whole of Europe during World War II were dropped on the Korean Peninsula, ravaging the entire land. According to the 1970 Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the casualty from the Korean War included the death of 220,000 South Korean soldiers, 140,000 US soldiers, 16,000 UN soldiers, 600,000 North Korean soldiers, and 1 million Chinese soldiers. If we include those who died of diseases during the war, the total of 2.5 million soldiers were sacrificed during the Korean war. The civilian casualty of the war included 500,000 South Koreans and 3 million North Koreans. All together 6 million people died. Additionally, the war engendered three million refugees and 10 million separated families.

These wounds have led to a hostile atmosphere on the Korean peninsula, where mutual hatred and suspicion is presumed. This division-mindset dominates all our thinking, and such a divisive mindset exerts generalized influence on all aspects of the society -- on politics, on economy, on culture and education.

First, our society can be called a warring society.

The unfinished war divides the people into friends and enemies, in black and white logic. You divide people into friends and the enemy, and live with mutual distrust and hostility. Under the slogan of “Anti-Communism as Patriotism,” there was a time when hating our northern brothers and sisters was a national objective. Being suspicious of others was supposed to be normal, and such suspicion was taught as a patriotic virtue. When we meet a stranger, exchange some pertinent personal information, and if this stranger is not of the similar background as you, then you become in principle antagonistic toward that person. Such a mindset resulted in cronyism based on regional origins and schools one attended. Conformity in thought is enforced, and thinking differently from the narrow conformity is regarded as false. The word “different” is used synonymously with “wrong.”

Second, ours is a results-obsessed and winner-takes-all society.

War causes one to be obsessed with extreme survival thinking: if I don't kill you, you will kill me. In this society, it is considered to be normal for a winner to take it all. Only the winners exist in this society. Thus, no cost is too high, no effort too great to come out as a winner at the end. Here, the question of whether the means was justifiable becomes irrelevant. As the saying goes, “Whatever means, just get to Seoul somehow!” Whether it is the politicians garnering the power or the business people accumulating their wealth, the legitimacy and morality of “by what process and means” do not play a role as long as you attain your goal. Unfortunately, such a mentality is rather prevalent. Instead of struggle and hard work, you would try to use a short-cut such as cronyism to achieve your goal. (A wrestler who has won the silver medal in the Olympic Games laments again the Heaven why he was allowed only the silver medal.)

Third, a warring society enforces abnormal thinking as normal.

There is no culture of healthy debates leading to a constructive convergence of a variety of ideas and opinions. Even constructive criticism for a betterment of the society is considered risky because you will become vulnerable to be reprimanded by an ideological measurement of the dominant social force. One example that clearly demonstrates the abnormality of Korean society would be the case where we would shed tears for the children in Africa and raise the funds to help them, while showing no sign of mercy when the North Korean children are dying of starvation. In this kind of social atmosphere, you would be branded as dangerous with an ideologically motivated name calling if you show even a slightest hint of progressive thinking.

This kind of circumstances have lasted for so long that even though we may sing the song, “Our Wish Is Reunification,” our effort to try to achieve unification is in fact almost non-existent. The reunification is now even considered an unwanted headache, and preferring the status quo as long as there is no physical war pervades the society over all.

But the Reunification of Korea is not an issue we could ever give up.

Shortly after the reunification of Germany, the German Council of Churches EKD invited NCKK to visit Germany. At the time, the situation in East and West Germany was chaotic. The people in both the former West and East Germany were dissatisfied. In particular, while visiting the former East Germany, we discovered that the disappointment and frustration there was greater than previously thought. Despite the political and territorial reunification, the inner wall between the people of the former East Germany and the former West Germany were felt higher than before. The closing sermon held by a German church leader at the end of the conference was as follows:

"We Germans wanted to prepare for the reunification. However, after Fall of the Wall, we realized that the preparation was insufficient. We hope and pray that the Korean Church would better-prepare for their unification, learning from our German experience as a trial example.....Unlike Germany, however, Korea had the experience of a fratricidal war. I hope that you would remember this when preparing for your re-unification much more thoroughly, and may the Christian Church play a leading role in this process."

As the Korean Church and Korean Christians were the light and salt for the Korean society in the past, they should resolve in their hearts to take the lead again for the last issue of the Korean people, that of overcoming the division and achieving a peaceful re-unification.

The church should also take the lead in correcting all the warped aspects of the society, which have long evolved over the years of national division.

It won't be easy to overcome the division-mindset formed over a long period of time. But let us remind ourselves of the situation of the early church. The nascent early church was only a collection of shabby small communities within the Roman Empire. But with the Gospel of Love, they were able to change the time honored concept of justice called "lex talionis," the rule of retaliation: "It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." (Deuteronomy 19:21)

Jesus said: **38** "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' (Genesis 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:22) **39** But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. **40** And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. **41** And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. **42** Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

The Korean Church has to stand in and sustain the place of reconciliation. The deep wounds of the war between North and South Korea and the ensuing dissension, division and distrust between North and South are not something that can

be easily dealt with. Yet, we are Christians, and being Christians means professing to follow Jesus. This Jesus we profess to follow taught us to love our enemies. (Luke 6:27-28)

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers,⁹ what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

The Korean Church should be able to respond to God's grace. In the society where it is considered just to hate our enemies, the Korean church needs to insist on the love of enemies for this is the perfecting of our faith. When the church never gives up on realizing this foundational Christian value, the real transformation of Korean society is possible, and in this way, the Korean Church can become the hope for Korea.

In some sense, the political and territorial reunification could be easier. However, the place for reconcilers can be very hard and difficult because Koreans nowadays are supposed to declare which side they belong to and being hostile towards the enemy is considered patriotic.

But, Jesus came to reconcile God and the people, people with people as well as the people and the nature. If we as Christians give up the commandment of Jesus to love our enemies, we are also giving up being authentic Christians.

The Korean Peninsula nowadays needs to be filled with the spirit of reconciliation. As we have recently witnessed, the political atmosphere between North and South Korea is like trying to walk on thin ice. It is here that we as Christians have to overcome the division-mindset in ourselves and give our very best to help Koreans to choose the path of reconciliation and coexistence.

From the perspective and logic of the world, it would appear unrealistic for the North and South Korea to be reconciled with each other. But, it is possible with the teachings of Jesus Christ to love our enemies. This Jesus whom we believe had set the example and already showed it to us through his life.

If the ten million Christians in Korea today are striving to become true disciples of Jesus Christ, the division on the Korean peninsula can be overcome. Amen.