

Whoever Receives This Little Child in My Name *

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1 Scripture Reading

An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them. “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.”

John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.”

Luke 9:46–50 (NRSV)

2 Introduction

2.1 ICU

Let me introduce myself briefly. I came to ICU 13 years ago. I moved into a house on the cam-

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pus, and transferred my membership to ICU church some 10 years ago.

Before I came to ICU, I taught at a national university in Osaka for 13 years. I was the supervisor of a Bible study group and that is where I met my wife. Out of over 300 faculty members, I think I was the only Christian there.

When I was contemplating about moving to another university for various reasons, I saw a job vacancy advertisement of ICU. I felt that it was my responsibility to apply for the post as they wanted a Christian. At the same time, I thought that if there was anybody more suitable for the post, that would be also fine, as I thought I had a mission to carry out as a Christian at a non-Christian school. But the more I learned about ICU, the more I felt that God was calling me there. That is how I came, heart filled with high hopes.

You know that ICU requires that in principle all the members of the faculty must be Christians. And I think such a school in this country where less than 1% of the population is Christian, must have a special mission and responsibility to the Christian churches in Japan. How should I take up such a special mission? How should I respond to the calling? This is a question I repeatedly ask myself over the past 13 years since I came to ICU. I still ask it to myself now.

2.2 At ICU

Ever since I came here, I tried to invite students over to my house as often as possible, as I think living on the campus is ideal, something that was never possible in the university where I worked before. Here, I tried to start a Bible study at my house several times, only to have to give it up due to too small attendance. Of course, there are other Bible study meetings on the campus, such as the one by KGK, (*Kirisutoshu Gakusei Kai*, Inter-varsity Christian Fellowship in Japan), held several times a week, or Bible study meetings of ICU church both in English and in Japanese. Maybe there is no need to start a new one, I thought. But for me, it is a spiritual challenge to have an opportunity for the faculty and the students to discuss the Bible. So I wanted to have one at my house.

At the end of the general education course I taught in the winter term in 2002, I told the students “If there are more than two who are interested, I will start a Bible study group”. Then, 2 students responded. Thus started a weekly Bible study from 7:30 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. at our house from the spring term of 2003.

During the spring break of that year, I participated in the annual Thai Work Camp. And some students who went with me to Thailand also come to this Bible Study to this day. Well, the Bible Study is not always active or well attended. I had to cancel the meeting twice because nobody showed up. Several times, there was only one participant. Right now we are enjoying a little larger attendance probably because I put up an ad in ICU’s internal website.

We normally take up one chapter and discuss it over 2-4 meetings. I prepare some questions concerning the given chapter beforehand, and during the meeting, we discuss these questions

together. Sometimes, there are too many questions to settle the discussion. In any case, I try not to give any conclusive remark and let the students ponder those unanswered questions as we move on. This is partly because I am just a layman, but also because I want them to take time and give those questions deep thought.

My wife always serves them home-baked cake and tea. That may be what the students look forward to more than the Bible study itself. In any case, I would like to continue my effort and face with the students whatever questions posed by or challenges given by the Bible. Please pray for us.

3 Whoever Receives This Little Child in My Name

3.1 Background/Outline

In the Bible study, we are now reading the gospel according to Luke. We just finished studying chapter 9 before the summer vacation. So today, I would like to take an episode from chapter 9 and share my thoughts with you.

In chapter 9, verse 46, it says that an argument arose among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. They didn’t do this argument openly, but Jesus knew what was going on. Jesus then took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.”

Arguments as to which one of them was the greatest arose a number of times in different parts of the Bible. In the gospel according to Luke, another dispute arose at the table of the last supper, in chapter 22, verse 24.

What is common in the two episodes is that both arguments arose right after Jesus telling the disciples his forthcoming sufferings and death. In other words, these arguments are recorded as if to show the gap that lies between Jesus who was trying to reveal who he was and the disciples who were so ignorant and had no understanding of what Jesus was trying to say.

Please look at chapter 9. In this chapter, from verse 1 to 6, the disciples are given power and authority over all demons and are given opportunities to actually practice this power, but, as portrayed in verse 37 to 43, unable to cast the unclean spirit out of a boy who had convulsions. To this, Jesus deplored, saying “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” This is then followed by the second prediction of his forthcoming suffering, and then by today’s part of the scripture.

In verse 20, Peter confesses, probably on behalf of all the disciples, that Jesus is the Messiah of God. It may be the case that the disciples discussed who was the greatest as they envisioned the time when Jesus receives glory from God.

In today’s part of the scripture, Jesus realizes that this is an important moment, a great opportunity to teach the disciples about salvation, as they seem to have no understanding of his message at all. In other words, while confessing that he is the savior sent by God, Jesus challenged the disciples with a decisive blow to their values. Jesus put a little child by his side, and said “Whoever welcomes this child in my name, welcomes me ...”, to shake the foundation of their values.

When I see a little child, or a person, I often visualize this scene. When Jesus said “welcome this child in my name”, he did not simply say it in words. Instead he actually put a child by his

side in front of the disciples.

I don’t think this child he put by his side was special or unique compared with other children. It could have been any child. Whenever I think of this episode, I try to visualize children as well as others around me, and ponder the meaning of this message, “whoever welcomes this child in the name of Jesus, welcomes Jesus Christ”. It is easier to think about this message in abstract terms. But, when you have somebody in your mind, or in front of you, the message has a greater impact on you.

3.2 Those Who We Should Receive

Here, the Bible does not elaborate on the nature of the child. The child is there for them to welcome amidst their argument as to who was the greatest.

For the arguing disciples, the child Jesus put by his side must have caused a great shock, for, I am sure each one of them had insisted, whether explicitly or not, that he was the greatest, he served Jesus best, or he was loved by Jesus most.

We, too, often find ourselves thinking the same way. I am greater than this person, I am doing a more important work than that person, My work is harder than theirs, I have more responsibility than others. Honestly speaking, I sometimes find myself harboring this kind of feeling. Just at such a time, Jesus put this little child in front them, by his side. What did he try to convey? How did the disciples take it? What do you think?

3.3 Charm of Little Children

When I give a quiz in my general education course, I make it a rule to leave some blank space at the bottom of the answer paper and invite the

students to write freely about a topic. I then write my response on the paper and return to the students.

I have been doing this even before I came to ICU. Since 1998, with their permission, I put all their comments on my website. The questions I often give them to write about recently are:

“What type of adult do you like most?”

“What are the charms of a child?”

I ask them these questions because as they are entering adulthood, I want them to be aware of their role model. I also want them to look back on their childhood which is not such a distant past for them.

I wonder how you would answer these questions. Of course, there can be many different answers. If you are interested, please visit my website.

When I read the message from the students, I discerned, for example, “Oh this student has an observant eye. He/she must have children around himself.” Or “Probably this student does not have any children around.”

How then did the disciples think about children, the child in front of them in particular? They may have many question marks in their mind. My five children are already grown up. But even when they were younger, it was not so easy to describe them in simple terms. Words such as pure-hearted or innocent weren't sufficient. A little child in literature and a little child in front of you are very different.

In the Bible, “a little child” is one of the important key words, and is used in many different ways. How is it used here? In this context, the word “a little child” is used as somebody insignificant, immature, undeveloped, imperfect, or not useful for any work At the same time, “a

little child” can also imply hope for the next generation, or a challenge to us as we need to trust in the Lord to accept it. “A little child” may symbolize Jesus himself as it represents qualities such as humility, and vulnerability. Or “a little child” may also represent the disciples for their lack of understanding.

3.4 Challenge to Your Values

When I was a teenager, I felt so worthless. I knew I needed many people, but I never thought that I was needed by others.

Some time after I entered a university, an assistant pastor of my church, who was also the director of a home for neglected and orphaned children, suggested that I do social work. He said to me, “we need you in this work”. It made me happy as until that time I had thought nobody/no work would need me. But at the same time, it was rather shocking because that was the time when I got so intrigued with mathematics. I started to want to continue my studies in graduate school. The thought of giving up my passion for mathematics to start all over again in the field of welfare scared me. Comparing with work in mathematics, to demonstrate a new theorem for example, to work in the field of welfare did not seem to me very appealing and challenging. I like being with children; I have helped with the church's kindergarten and worked as a volunteer at the children's home. But it just did not seem interesting enough for me to dedicate my whole life.

Later, I went to see the assistant pastor and told him that I had already chosen a different path for my career. I am not sorry for that decision. But whenever I read this part of the scripture, I remember this episode in my life, and ask myself, what is important in the sight of God?

4 Generosity

4.1 Our Co-Workers

Today, we also read the following passage after verse 49, the succeeding episode.

John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.” Why did they try to stop him? What was in their mind? Doesn’t something similar happen around you or in a Christian church?

You may remember a similar but a little different expression in the Bible. Let’s look at the same gospel according to Luke. Chapter 11 verse 23, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” Here it says, “Whoever is not with me is against me.” Today’s scripture says “Whoever is not against you is for you.”

As I have very limited knowledge of Greek, not to mention the Aramaic which Jesus spoke, I do not know the background of the language and the expressions used here. In chapter 11, it says “Whoever is not with me is against me.”, and in the chapter 9, John “tried to stop him, because he does not follow with them.” And to this, Jesus said “whoever is not against you is for you.” Whether somebody is for Jesus or against Jesus, whether this person is from God or not from God, that is very important. But in reality, it is very difficult to discern one from the other. That is why, I think, Jesus preached tolerance.

Here we must take special note of the fact that this person was casting out demons which the disciples could not cast out, that this was an act of love, that he did so in the name of Jesus.

Is this episode described after verse 49 related

to the preceding episode? I think it is. John and other disciples may have thought self-righteously that they had the authority as they had given up everything to follow Jesus. They probably looked down on the one who was casting out demons, as somebody inferior to them. They could not welcome him in the name of Jesus.

Doesn’t this happen to us in our daily life? Our eyes are not perfect to discern who is for Jesus and who is not. But I think Jesus wants us to welcome in his name even somebody who is imperfect, or immature. Especially when that someone is doing an act of love, no matter how imperfect it may be.

4.2 True Generosity

Recently, I read a book written by Kanzo Uchimura, entitled “How I became a Christian” I would like to share with you the following part.

The true liberality, as I take it, is allowance and forbearance of all honest beliefs with an unflinching conviction in one’s own faith. Belief in myself that I can know some Truth, and disbelief in myself that I can know all Truths, are the foundations of the true Christian liberality, the sources of all goodwills and peaceful dealings with all mankind. (p. 115)

(Uchimura, K. (1985). *How I became a Christian: Out of my diary, by a “heathen convert”*, Tokyo, Keiseisha.)

5 Summary

5.1 Who is the Greatest?

Let's go back to today's scripture lesson once again. The disciples were arguing as to who was the greatest. Each one must have thought that he was the greatest. At such a moment, Jesus put a little child, so insignificant in the eyes of the disciples by his side and said, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

To welcome somebody in front of us is to welcome Jesus. But why? Like the disciples, we are immature, imperfect, and so insignificant. But Jesus came to this world as a little child to love us who are so insignificant and unimportant. To accept and welcome us who are insignificant, that is the will of God, and that is what it means to welcome Jesus.

To welcome is not so easy. But when we know we are welcomed by Jesus, we find ourselves transformed into somebody capable of welcoming a little child.

5.2 Matthew 25

This reminds us of a parable of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats described in the Matthews chapter 25. It says that those who are blessed by God are those who gave Jesus food when he was hungry, gave him something to drink when he was thirsty, welcomed him when he was a stranger, gave him clothing when he was naked, took care of him when he was sick, and visited him when he was in prison, without knowing that they did all these things to Jesus. If you did it to one of the least, you did it to

Jesus.

5.3 Conclusion

I mentioned earlier that I put on my website students' messages, which I treasure very much. There I find the purest and the most sincere hearts, and lively heartbeat of each student who is so much loved by God.

To welcome each one of them as I welcome Jesus is what I think Jesus wants me to do.

I would like to ask myself again what is important in my life, and spend the rest of my time (in this world) to cherish and treasure them.

I tell myself, that to welcome a little child in the name of Jesus is to welcome Jesus, and that is what God wants me to do.

6 Prayer

Let us pray.

Our heavenly Father. Help us to welcome a little child as we welcome you. Help us to build peace among ourselves with our generosity, goodwill and love. Lead us to seek faith, hope and love.

Amen.

Translated by Yumi Obinata