

Our respective callings

John 21:1-23

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1. Introduction

The theme of today's sermon is calling. We shall consider this theme from the passage in John's Gospel. The word "calling" is "Shomei" in Japanese. Since this Japanese word is rarely used in our daily conversation and has almost become a technical term used only among Christians, it is necessary to define it clearly. One thing I should stress is that Shomei is relevant not only for full-time workers in the church, but also for those who work in a secular setting. To confirm this point, let us look at a passage in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1 verse 26:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters.

The word "call" is a translation of the Greek noun *kleisis*, and this is the word that is usually translated as "Shomei" in Japanese. Since Paul's addressees were predominantly lay persons, we can see that the word Shomei is applicable to those who are not directly engaged in a missionary activity.

The Greek noun is *kleisis* and the Greek verb which means "to call" is *kaleou*. God calls each of us by name, and commissions a specific task to you and me respectively. The apostle Paul was commissioned to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles, and you may be commissioned to a task which is not directly related to Christianity. Nevertheless, as far as your work is faithfully conducted for the glory of God, in the eyes of God, your work is of the same value as Paul's was. This truth was confirmed at the time of the Reformation and is called the universal priesthood of believers.

After confirming the basic point of "calling", we shall now turn to the biblical passage given for today's sermon. This passage focuses on the callings of two persons: Simon Peter and the author of John's Gospel, who is called "the beloved disciple". The person called the beloved disciple appears six times in John's Gospel, and almost always in contrast to Simon Peter. Indeed, in a sense, the beloved disciple is portrayed as being superior to Simon Peter in terms of his devotion to Jesus. For example, whereas, in the Passion narrative, Simon Peter and other disciples abandoned Jesus, the beloved disciple is the only male to follow Jesus, even to the foot of the cross, where Jesus entrusted his mother to him. Another example is found in the Resurrection narrative. When the disciples heard that Jesus' tomb was empty, both Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the empty tomb. However, whereas Peter was perplexed by the empty tomb, the narrative relates that the beloved disciple "saw and believed". In this way, the beloved disciple is portrayed, in comparison to Peter, as being more faithful in his devotion to Jesus and his teaching. The contrast between Peter and the beloved disciple

is important in today's passage as well. With this point in mind, let us turn our attention to today's reading.

2. Main body

Chapter 21, from which today's reading is taken, is a unique chapter in John's Gospel. In a sense, John's Gospel is completed in chapter 20. At the end of chapter 20, the purpose of writing this Gospel is articulated as follows:

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The concluding remarks are clearly stated. Why, then, does John add another chapter to his Gospel? This is because chapter 21 functions as an epilogue of this Gospel. Generally speaking, an epilogue provides the sequel that describes the fates of the main characters, after the main story is completed. In the case of John's Gospel, the protagonist, Jesus Christ, has successfully completed his mission through his death and resurrection, which is described up to chapter 20. Chapter 21 provides additional information as to the fates of his disciples.

One of the main characters in chapter 21 is Simon Peter. Although he is the leader of the twelve disciples, he has also experienced a serious personal defeat. How Peter is brought back by Jesus from his failure to his real calling is the main issue of this chapter. At the Last Supper, he boldly claimed as follows:

Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.'

However, only a few hours later, the same Peter vehemently denied being Jesus' companion.

Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, 'Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.' But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know this man you are talking about.'

Peter even swore an oath, when denying Jesus. After such a shameful experience, Peter seems to have been plagued by self-doubt. Of course he was delighted at the resurrection of Jesus, but he had lost confidence in his own vocation to be a fisherman for people. Therefore, although he was instructed by Jesus to remain in Jerusalem until receiving the power from above, as we see in Luke 24, he left Jerusalem and went to Galilee in order to resume his previous vocation, a fisherman not for people but for fish. Once Peter had been full of confidence in himself, but now he got trapped into serious self-

doubt.

The risen Lord appeared to Peter in such a situation. This is exactly a re-enactment of the calling of Peter recorded in Luke chapter 5. At that time, Peter had worked all night long but had caught nothing. But when he followed Jesus' instruction, Peter and others caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. Peter was then given his calling to catch people. And in this time, when Peter was about to return to being a fisherman of fish rather than people, the Lord came to him once again. Like in the night of his initial calling, Peter had not been able to catch anything through the night. But once Peter followed the instruction of the risen Lord and cast the net to the right side of the boat, he miraculously caught 153 fish! Although Peter did not initially recognize this man as his Lord, this incredible incident reminds him of his experience in his initial call. The highlight of today's scripture is a dialogue between Jesus and Peter after this event.

Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?'

In our Japanese translation, the last phrase is translated as 'Do you love me more than these other disciples do?' In this scene, besides Peter, there are six other disciples: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Thomas and Nathanael, the beloved disciple and another unknown disciple. Therefore, Jesus was actually asking Peter, "Is your love to me superior to that of James, John, or the beloved disciple?" But in my humble opinion, this is improbable. The Greek word *toutōn* simply means "these". It can be translated as either "these people" or "these things", and I believe the latter is the case. That is to say, Jesus didn't ask, 'Peter, do you love me more than James or the beloved disciple does?', but he asked, 'Peter, do you love me and the calling I have given to you more than your previous vocation as a fisherman and your previous way of life?' In fact, when Peter replied, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you', Jesus said to Peter, 'Feed my lambs'. What Jesus was actually saying was, 'If you love me, be faithful to the calling I have given to you'. Peter's calling is to take care of and nourish the people the Lord has entrusted to him.

Jesus asked Peter the same question three times, which corresponds to Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus on the night Jesus was arrested. This conversation reflects Jesus' deep love and care for Peter, who had been suffering remorse for his past behavior. Jesus wanted to heal the wound in Peter's heart by bringing him to say "I love you" three times. However, Peter, for his part, was sad at the reminder of his denial. Then he said,

Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.

Jesus' reply to Peter on this occasion is striking. In the past, when Peter declared that he would follow Jesus even at the cost of his life, Jesus predicted:

Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.

But now, the Lord predicts that Peter will be faithful to his calling until his death.

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.

According to tradition, Peter was martyred under the persecution of the emperor Nero. It is stated that he was hung on the cross upside down. Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, eventually glorified God in his faithful death.

Then, the subject moves to another key figure, the beloved disciple. When Peter was told about his own fate, he became curious about another person's fate, the fate of the one who seems to have been particularly favored by Jesus. So Peter asked Jesus:

Lord, what about him?

Although we may understand his feeling, this is a question that shouldn't have been asked. Each person is given an individual calling, and what we ought to do is to be faithful to our own callings. It is not our business to poke our noses into the calling of others. Whereas Peter became a great shepherd and glorified God through his death, the beloved disciple fulfilled his calling by completing the fourth Gospel and is thought to have died in peace in Ephesus. But it is pointless to ask which of them achieved more. What is crucial is that each of them is faithful to his own calling.

We tend to evaluate our callings and our relationships with Jesus in comparison with others. How much am I loved by Jesus? How much is she loved by Jesus? Is my love for Jesus greater than his or hers? But Jesus says that is not our business. What we should do is be faithful to our own callings, and, through our faithfulness, the Kingdom of God will advance in our world.

3. conclusion

Today, we have learned the story of Peter's reaffirmation of his calling. Jesus provided him with encouragement and restored him to his apostleship. Later at Pentecost he gave him the strength, through the Holy Spirit, to carry out the tasks appropriate to his calling. Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, lost confidence and his way, but Jesus gently and reassuringly told him what his true calling was. However, Jesus did not allow him to inquire as to another disciple's calling.

We are given our own callings, respectively. It is no use comparing our vocations to others'. What matters is whether, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, we are faithful to our callings.

Let us pray together.