

[1]

Many people say that the greatest gift of life is true friendship. A Greek poet Euripides argued that “one loyal friend is worth ten thousand relatives.” Yes, it’s true. Lucius Seneca, a Roman Stoic philosopher, said, “One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood.”

A few days ago Yoo Mi, my wife, showed me a video clip of friendship. It’s very short but impacted me a lot. I would like to share it with you.

[Video clip #1]



This video shows clearly what it means to understand and to be understood. To understand others signifies waiting for them to walk in their ways and at their pace. To be understood means being unconditionally accepted as we are. So, in true friendship in which mutual understanding may happen there can be unity.

Like in the video clip, true companionship makes people walk together hand in hand, to support each other as much as possible, and to communicate clearly enough to be on the same page.

[2]

In today’s Gospel reading, John 11:1-45, there is a very popular narrative regarding the raising of Lazarus. The story is simple. A man named Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died at Bethany. Jesus came there four days after the burial and raised Lazarus from the dead. Most Christians may hear this story at least more than once.

However, the meaning of this narrative isn't easy to fully understand because it has multiple layers. Today, I would like to read it from the perspective of friendship between Jesus and his loving people. I am not sure whether you find it or not when reading the passages, but in the story it is full of miscommunication and disunity- that is far from true companionship.

First of all, we can find the miscommunication between Jesus and his disciples. In verses 1-16, Jesus' conversation with his disciples was recorded, and it is very weird.

Jesus got the news that Lazarus was sick, but he stayed two more days as he wanted to do something amazing for God's glory. But his followers couldn't understand what their teacher would do, and furthermore, they stopped him from going to Bethany where Lazarus died, worrying about the Jews who stoned them before. According to John 10, the large crowd tried to kill Jesus because of his declaration that he was the Son of God.

Jesus told his company, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up.” At this, Jesus spoke of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So Jesus told them plainly again, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I wasn't there, so that you may believe.”

Then Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” What happened to them? Did they use different languages? Given that they stayed and ate together for three years, those difficulties of communication looked so strange. There seemed to be no true friendship.

[3]

We can also find a similar situation that occurred at Bethany. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. She said to Jesus, “If you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.” Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus tried to help her comprehend what he meant: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die. Do you

believe this?” She replied, “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

However, it was revealed before long that her answer wasn't based on solid understanding. When Jesus came to the tomb and asked, “Take away the stone,” Martha stopped him saying, “No Lord. By this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days.” Look, they weren't on the same page.

Mary even stayed at home when Jesus came; she didn't go out to welcome Jesus with her sister. When Martha told her that Jesus was asking for her, then Mary came out to meet him. Their attitudes were far from the good friendship that they were developing with Jesus. Their deep relationship was highlighted in the Gospel of John and Luke. But, their relationship changed like this:



This image is entirely different from the harmonious cooperation in the video clip that we've watched just before. How did it happen?

[4]

Mary and Martha were probably very disappointed at Jesus' coming too late. They might have expected that Jesus would have come to them as soon as possible. They believed that if only Jesus had been there, their brother wouldn't have died. They told Jesus this when they first met him after Lazarus had died.

They seemed full of deep hurt and resentment at Jesus' reaction, which weakened their trust in Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples were occupied by fears of being stoned by the Jews. Since they worried too much about the attacks from those fundamental sects, they couldn't follow Jesus properly.

Likewise, our relationship with Jesus is too fragile as we are human beings. It could be easily broken with our sense of fear, hurt, disappointment, etc. Here is the key point of this narrative. Focus on the major alterations of those who had

followed Jesus. Now, their companionship disappeared; instead only miscommunication and disunity were shown.

Even though they were still with Jesus, the brightest light in the world, they stayed in the darkness. Yes, they were exactly the same as Lazarus who was in the dark tomb. At this point, the object of Jesus’ salvation expands, and verse 33 is crucial in catching this critical change.

In the New International Version of the English Bible verse 33 reads like this, “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” So Jesus wept in verse 35. In this version we would guess that Jesus was compassionate to Mary and other people there, so wept together with them. I’ve understood like that.

However, what’s remarkable is that the New Living Translation interprets this passage very differently as follows: “When Jesus saw Mary weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled.” Here, Jesus was very annoyed with them. The Contemporary English Version also describes that Jesus was terribly upset, and started crying.

The Greek word that was translated as “deeply moved” in NIV and as “annoyed” and “upset” in NLT and CEV each is ἐμβριμάομαι (Embrimaomai), which literally means to groan, get angry or sigh bitterly. The translation of NLT and CEV is nearer to the original meaning than NIV.

Then, why was he deeply annoyed and terribly upset? Because his loving people were spiritually dead like Lazarus. When Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out from the tomb, he didn’t order only the dead man, but also his friends who fell to the spiritual collapse. Jesus was desperate to raise them again, with tears in his eyes.

[5]

Sisters and brothers,

The event of Lazarus indicates that we could be another Lazarus when we are stuck in our thinking, emotion, or situation. Anyone can leave Jesus and fall into the dark tomb suddenly.

“Lazarus, Come out” (Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45/ April 2, 2017/ Lent 5)
Rev Dr Jong Soo Park (Minister of Ocean Grove Parish of UCA)

So, we need the power of the word every day to understand and to be understood. As Jesus’ declaration raised Lazarus from the dead, his word can revive and restore our faith and friendship although sometimes we stumble in our faith journey. Even though we are far from life like dry bones, if his living word touches our heart, we can be raised again.

For this, even today, Jesus is calling us, “Lazarus, Come out!” Amen.