

Unable or Unbelief (July 8, 2018)
(Mark 6:1-13; 2 Cor 12:2-10)

“Can God create a rock so heavy that He can't lift?”. This modern version of the 12th century omnipotence paradox creates a dilemma of "the belief in the almighty God" and "the power of reasoning". These two concepts compete against each other but at the same time lead us to refine our understanding of “ability” and the quality of having unlimited or super power. They also open our eyes to a wide spectrum, from the inability to do anything at one end to the ability to do everything at the other.

We know the story of a woman who had hemorrhage disease and got healed by touching Jesus' clothes. However, in today's scripture Jesus could only lay hands on a few sick people and heal them. It describes a moment that Jesus "wasn't able to do much of anything". He was amazed at their unbelief.

This gives us a feeling that Jesus was unable to do certain things has something to do with the disbelief of the people. Yet Jesus did not try to change the attitude of people forcefully, including his kinsmen, his disciple Judas, the Pharisees, the high priest, and Pilate. Jesus allowed them to respond according to their prejudices. Jesus was not unable to behave differently in front of them, he just gave others the chance to exercise their right to act and react based on what was in their mind.

The way how Jesus taught his disciples and his contemporaries was not through compulsion or intimidation nor was it result-driven. Instead, Jesus' approach to life is a faith approach. In the context of religion, faith was often defined as confidence or trust in a particular system of religious belief. This statement looks fair in describing what faith is for most people. But the kind of faith that Jesus expected from his disciples, his contemporaries and from us is deeper and wider.

The Letter to Hebrews might be helpful for us to understand an important aspect of “faith”. It says, “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). There's always an element of unknown and risk in faith. Faith is not something we can purchase and own like a commodity. Faith is the source of power, but it's not the kind of “power” which expresses through “dominion”. The power of faith is based on God's love; the kind of love that looks powerless,

just as what Jesus did. But that power could transform a person's life completely at different times and at the right moment.

Shall we rely solely on our senses in perceiving this world? Although it is factual that we can't live well without our senses, we must also be aware that they do have their limitations. It is easy to demonstrate with examples of optical illusions. If we keep an open mind about cognition and the way how our future is perceived, God could make well use of it. If we see our future as a closed system, we may become trapped inside our wrong perception of the world where even God cannot help us.

We must not fixate ourselves only on moments that are favorable. There are moments of happiness and grieves in life. Christian belief helps us to embrace all these experiences and move on. Even Jesus himself was being labeled and rejected. It is a fact that his teaching was considered as wise and his work as wonderful in his hometown. Yet Jesus said, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house". The folks in his hometown thought they knew him and his family well. Stigmatization is not a modern phenomenon that happens only here and now, it also happened in the past. There were probably moments when Jesus did not look brilliant when he was a kid, a teenager, or a young adult. There were reasons that can explain why Jesus was looked down by his own people; it might be due to his occupation, the region where he grew up or even his fatherless family.

Paul has been given "a thorn in the flesh." It was probably a physical one, referring to Paul's eye sickness. For us or for others, it might be weakness in physical, mental or even spiritual nature. However, God's love is unconditional, which often expresses itself in forgiveness. That is the foundation upon which we do not have to treat ourselves hard. That's also the reason why we can quit focusing on the things we can't do and begin appreciating the gifts we have been given. The more we learn about how to deal with our weaknesses, the stronger we can become.

Does "Unable" or "Unbelief" matter any more? Contrarily faith is about enabling and believing. Best of all, faith journey is for everybody. No one will be left alone. Amen.