

"You Are Enough"

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³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

As Paul opens his letter to Corinth with a blessing of grace, we get the sense that grace may have been in short supply. As he prays that they would have God's peace, we wonder if peace has been hard to find. The deeper we get into this pastoral letter, the more we realize that the people of Corinth had become very uncertain about their spiritual strength and their grounding in the faith. In Christ they had been brought together as one body of Christ, but in the very first chapter we learn that there are significant and painful divisions in the church. In Christ they had been given access to God's wisdom, but in the sixth chapter that wisdom seems to be failing and the people are making bad decisions. In Christ they have great knowledge, but in the eighth chapter we find that people are using that knowledge to beat each other up over a question about idol meat. In Christ they had been taught to share graciously at the Lord's Table, but in the eleventh chapter we discover that self-interest and class differences are breaking the harmony. In Christ they had been introduced to the depth and power of God's love, but in the thirteenth chapter we get the feeling that this love was not being shared effectively within the congregation. The cumulative effect of all of this failure and difficulty seems to have created a crisis of confidence in Corinth — an unspoken, lingering concern that they might not have the strength and endurance to go the distance with Christ.

So here, at the very beginning of his pastoral letter to the house churches of Corinth, Paul begins with a word of encouragement and assurance. "*You are not lacking,*" he writes. You have what you need to do what you have been called to do. "*God is faithful,*" Paul says, and the Lord will "*strengthen you to the end.*"

I think all of us, from time to time, wonder if we really have what it takes. A woman named Linda Gregory certainly felt this way when she first confronted her Korean heritage.¹ Linda was adopted by American parents when she was just a baby, coming to the United States when she was just four months old. She was raised as an American through and through. It was the only identity she had ever known. It was only when she became an adult and fell in love with a man of Korean descent that she truly began to explore the culture of her birth. She realized that, if she was serious about staying with Abraham, she would have to learn much more about her Korean identity. Abraham was Korean-American, but most of his family still lived in Korea. They were still very connected to that culture, and it was especially important to Abraham

¹ Linda Gregory, "Unexpected Embrace," <https://themoth.org/stories/unexpected-embrace>, accessed November 30, 2017.

because he was the eldest grandson born of the eldest son. This was a very special place in the family tree, and it meant that Abraham would be expected to carry on ancestral responsibilities and traditions that connected countless generations.

As the couple got more serious, Linda decided to take a year off and move to Korea. She wanted to explore her roots and try her best to discover her own Korean identity. So she picked up and moved to Seoul, South Korea. When she had been there about three months, she got a call from Abraham. "You need to meet my grandparents," he said. Because Korean culture places so much value on age and wisdom, this was a necessary sign of respect and obligation. It was also a relatively urgent thing, as the grandparents were getting on in years and Abraham's grandfather was declining fast with increasing signs of dementia. He had made it very clear that his last wish was to see his grandson married.

To prepare for the appointment, there were two things that Linda would have to do. The first related to the grandmother, Jang Won Lee, who was known in the family as someone who possessed the gift of *noonchi* ("the sight"). From back in the states, Abraham did his best to help Linda to prepare for the meeting. "Quick," he told her over the phone, "send me your best photo." He needed a photo because *noonchi*, in his grandmother's case, meant that she purportedly had the ability to see deeply into a person's character through a photo of that person. I'm not sure how I would go about choosing one photo of myself that would be used to assess the totality of my character and personality. At the very least, I would try to choose wisely. Linda did the same. She searched for one good photograph that, in her words, would make her look strong and healthy and "maybe just a little bit taller."

In addition to that request, Linda had to learn a new skill. She had to learn to bow. Bowing has a very important place in Korean culture, from the basic head bob given to superiors at work to the deepest bows that are reserved for honored leaders in government and family. This meeting of the grandparents would be an occasion for the deepest, most reverent bow, and the choreography for these is fairly precise and technical. There is a "right way" to do it. So, without Abraham around to teach her, Linda turned to the greatest source of learning currently known to humanity: YouTube. You can literally learn to do anything on YouTube. You can fix your lawnmower, do all kinds of repairs on your car, or learn to breakdance. For example, a few years ago, instead of paying a professional, I replaced a cracked screen on Molly's iPad using a YouTube video. It never worked again, but that's not the point. Linda knew the bow she learned on YouTube would not be perfect, but it did not need to be perfect. It just needed to be good enough.

Not surprisingly, the night before her scheduled meeting with the grandparents Linda had a stress dream. She imagined arriving at a huge palace, and then being escorted across a long and grand courtyard to her audience with Abraham's grandparents. It was the culmination of worries that had haunted her for weeks. Would the grandmother be able to see through her? Would she sense, through Linda's photo and a clumsy bow, that Linda was not truly Korean? Would these people who held her happiness in their hands simply decide that she was not enough?

The next day, when it was time to go, Linda traveled to the outskirts of Seoul. When she arrived at the home, there was no palace, no courtyard. It was a simple walkup apartment. When she walked through the door, she saw a basic leather sofa and a big screen TV on the wall. And then, from somewhere off to her left side, Linda heard a loud and sudden shriek. It was Abraham's grandmother, and it was a shriek of joy. Linda turned and saw this elderly Korean woman throw her walker against the wall and start running over to her with wobbly knees and open arms. She threw those arms around Linda's neck in a bear hug.

Linda hugged her back, because she had no choice. But in that moment she couldn't help thinking, "Is this a trick? Am I even allowed to touch her? When am I supposed bow?" She

thought briefly about trying to bow real quick so she could do the bow she had practiced so long. But the time for bowing never came. At one point in the visit, as the two women sat on the couch, the grandmother took Linda's hand in hers. It was a hand that was almost identical in size to her own, a hand that felt so familiar in an embrace that felt so natural. Linda felt comfortable enough in that moment to share some of the nervousness she had experienced before the meeting, to which the grandmother simply replied, "Of course I would have accepted you." Linda could not explain why that was. She had not bowed. She had not had a chance to explain her heritage. She had not done anything or said anything to prove that she was really Korean, that she would be a good partner for Abraham, that she would honor this family. And still she had been deemed enough... indeed, more than enough.

In the background of all of this was Abraham's grandfather. Through it all, he had remained completely silent. With a calm but strong demeanor, he had stayed back in the corner of the room. Later Linda would learn that he had spent the entire day before trying to think of a precious family story that he could share with her. Linda had also thought deeply about things she had wanted to say to him – how thankful she was that he would see her, how blessed she felt to be part of his family, that she would try her best to uphold the traditions that meant so much to him. Even though both desperately wanted to, they never spoke to each other. Even though each had much to say, no words would come out.

When it was time to go, Linda turned back to make one last effort at saying something meaningful. Still, no words would come. Finally, she just decided to take a chance and give him a hug. She was relieved and overjoyed to find that he hugged her back. His embrace, she later said, was warm, accepting, and infused with unconditional love. As Linda left, the grandfather said the only word he uttered the entire time. That word was "*salanghae*" — "I love you."

And she never even had to bow.

The famous psychologist Carl Rogers once wrote this about the way he would approach every client who came to him for therapy. "There is something I do before I start a session," Rogers said. "I let myself know that I am enough. Not perfect. Perfect wouldn't be enough. But that I am human, and that is enough. There is nothing this [person] can say or do or feel that I can't feel in myself. I can be with [this person]. I am enough."²

We are all flawed. We are all imperfect. But our God, who is indeed faithful, has chosen you, and that is enough. You are enough. Not perfect. Perfect wouldn't be enough. But you are chosen and set apart by One who is more than enough. As Advent begins, as we start again this annual pilgrimage to prepare ourselves for the rebirth of God's love in us and in the world, scripture gives us this holy assurance: "*you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Harold S. Kushner, *How Good Do We Have To Be?*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company (1996), p. 7.