

In January, I shared a message on Sunday morning about my goals for 2011. The verse I preached from was Philippians 3:7-11.

I emphasized how my goal was to know Christ, especially “**the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings**”. If I can know Christ, know his heart. If I can get perspective on my situation- see my trials, weaknesses, and possibly even suffering from Christ's perspective, then I feel like I would be moving forward in my faith. “Pressing onward” as Paul put it in the next verses, 12-14.

Now, 9 months into the year, I think it is time for a check-up. How am I doing?

I still have a problem with complaining. I am still working on that. Yet, I think God gave me some very amazing opportunities to explore His heart. I wanted to share a little about those experiences in this message.

After the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, I didn't think about what it really means to know Christ in his sufferings. I thought about suffering. Period. How could I understand suffering when I ran from it? I saw people on the trains just days after the earthquake listening to their iPods or chatting about a new shopping mall, going about their lives as if nothing had happened. I knew that God cared intensely about what happened and that He cares intensely about everything that happens to us here. We are the ones who close our eyes and hearts until we see only what we want to see and stay completely unmoved by the suffering of others. Most of those people on the trains are suffering, too. They're lonely, broken, and struggling to find meaning, but they close their eyes to their real suffering and try to drown out the screams of their souls with their iPods or shop themselves into feeling satisfied. I noticed that I do those same things. I needed an awakening.

I decided to take a trip to Tohoku. These were just a few of my motivations. Others included my responsibility as a teacher to model what I most want my kids to learn. How I can teach my kids compassion if I feel nothing for the suffering of others? I call the first trip “the eye-opener and the heart-breaker”. God opened my eyes to a lot of things. While I did what little I could to pour out love and help to my neighbors in Ishinomaki, what I remember most is what God poured into my heart. Priorities- definitely don't start with the material things because that is what I'd been shoveling into burlap bags for two days. Foundations- any foundation other than Christ will wash away. Hope- it colors how we live in this life. People who hope for comfort alone live for the comfort of this life alone. People who hope for eternal joy in the presence of Christ experience it in the most horrible of situations even here on earth.

That was the first trip. One step toward knowing Christ. And all praise goes to Christ Jesus who opened my eyes.

Then I took a second trip just a few weeks back. I didn't go with the OIC group, mostly because it was cheaper to go with Be One. The two biggest impressions I got from this trip were God's presence and God's work.

For today's message, I simply want to share what God has been teaching me. If it encourages you or motivates, praise God. If you find it boring or useless for you in your journey of faith, then I thank you for simply listening.

### **God's Presence**

This message is not about convincing anyone whether or not God exists. I believe in God. God's very name is "exist". YHWH. "I AM" "I AM WHO I AM AND I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE". What I would like to talk about is what God's presence looks like in the lives of his people. In the Old Testament, the Israelites had an ark, a beautiful golden box, which they carried around on their backs or kept in the Tent of the Tabernacle or the Temple.

### **Hebrews 9:3-4**

**"Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant."**

The ark held proof of God's provision, proof of God's leadership, and the laws of God. For the people of Israel, the ark represented the presence of God. The ark was carried into battle. It was paraded through the streets. The ark was in the Most Holy Place of the temple. (It reminds me a bit of the portable shrines you see in the Japanese festivals). But something changed when Jesus showed up. Jesus fulfilled the laws of God, and in his death and resurrection, he offered his own body as our bread of life. When God sends us His Holy Spirit, we receive his guidance from within. We no longer have to carry the law of God on our backs, it comes into our hearts. God's presence is carried IN us. God lives IN us. We've started our way through Acts, and right at the beginning in **Acts 1:8** we are told,

**"But you will receive power from when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."**

In **2 Cor. 4:10** it says,

**"We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."**

Since God lives IN us, we carry Christ. We carry the name of Christ as Christians. We are Christ's body as the church. We are like little arks or walking temples!

In **2 Cor. 2:14-15** it says,

**“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”**

We are the aroma of Christ! People should smell Christ whenever we walk into a room. I have a student whom I love dearly. He is a funny kid. One day he was standing next to the shyest girl in his grade. Both of them were “out” in a game of dodgeball and were waiting to get back in the game. Suddenly this boy just leaned over and gave the girl a big whiff. Then he turned to me and said, “Ms. Kami! She smells good!” The girl in question was completely freaked out, and though I’m sure he meant it to be a compliment, I told him that most girls don’t like it when guys sniff them.

But seriously, if people were to give us a big sniff, would they smell Christ? Would they say, “She smells good!”

In **2 Cor. 5:20** it says,

**“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”**

Of course, God is at work everywhere. God is omni-present. All present. He has no limits, but he has also chosen to live in us. We become the temple. Our hearts, though far from being holy on their own, become the Most Holy Place where God’s presence resides. Let’s think about this. As Christians, wherever we go, Jesus goes, too. Where are we bringing the presence and aroma of Christ? Work, school, friends’ houses, bars, banks, restaurants, trains, stores, OIC, streets, parking lots. In every one of these places, we represent Christ. We carry Christ. We smell of Christ.

Does Christ look heavy? Do we groan and complain?

Does Christ smell good? Does Christ look good?

Do we serve others both in and out of church in ways that let others see Christ and Christ’s love alive in us? I’ll emphasize that again. Do people see Christ and Christ’s love ALIVE in us? I’m not saying that others see us TRYING to make Christ look good or smell good or seem light. IS Christ lightening our hearts, looking good, and smelling good? I’m more concerned about the self-evaluation than the outside perception.

Let me give you an example of what Christ smells like.

In my first trip, I spent a lot of time fighting nausea as I shoveled my way through piles of stinking, rotten, maggoty fish. The whole neighborhood had the smell of rotteness hanging over it. After cleaning up a park, the group held a barbecue to bless the community. Some of the people came because they had seen us working in that park for

3 days, and they were curious when the grills came out. It was obvious that we were present in the community. Some people came because we walked through the neighborhood, going door-to-door inviting people or shouting through a bullhorn. We carried our message out into the community. But, many people also came because of the smell. The irresistible smell of delicious barbecue drew people from their shambled houses into a place of fellowship. That is what we are to be as the fragrance of Christ—the smell of barbecue chicken in the midst of rotten fish. God is present and working everywhere. He is also present in us, and working in and through us. Our work most of the time is to simply show up, carry Christ to others, and simply let Christ's love flow out and be an irresistible aroma that draws people into fellowship with Christ. Let me share another story with you, about Suzuki-san. Suzuki-san is this sweet lady we met. She lost some of her family in the tsunami and was living on the second floor of her house with her daughter and granddaughter. Suzuki treated us to a lunch after we finished working on her house. After lunch, she told us, "You have no idea what you've done here. Just look around the community. People's faces are brighter because of what you've done."

We said, "No, no, it really has nothing to do with us."

She said, "Let me tell you what you've done. After the tsunami, we had no lifelines. No electricity, gas, heat, or water. The lady across the street had a well, but we only had the plastic jugs we could scavenge from the rubble to hold water in. We all told ourselves that if we could just make it 2-3 days, the government would show up with supplies and help us. Three days go by and still we have nothing. There are a lot of elderly people who can't do much by themselves. We thought, let's just try to hold on. Surely it will only take them 4-5 days. Let's just try to make it for 5 days. Still nothing. So the ones who could walk that far went to the evacuation center and stood in line for food. The rules for the food distribution, though, said only one rice ball and one bottle of water per person. Those people came back and split that rice ball between 4-5 people. We were starving. Then you guys showed up. I ran through the streets saying, 'God has come! God has shown up! We thought we were abandoned but God has shown up!' You brought food and fresh vegetables and water. You promised to come again. I was afraid to give anyone hope, so I kept your promise a secret. I didn't tell anyone the day or time you told us. Then when you called to ask if we were ready for you to come, I ran through the streets yelling, 'God keeps his promises!'"

After Suzuki-san told us all this, most of us had tears in our eyes. I asked her if she would like for us to pray with her. She yelled for everyone to come in and we prayed for her and her family to be filled with joy and that she and her family would be blessed and

filled with God's hope. What amazed me was that Suzuki-san knew who was really at work. She didn't say, 'Be One has shown up' or 'Be One keeps its promises.'

God showed up. God keeps his promises. God is at work.

### **God's Work**

What does God's work look like in the lives of his people?

In **John 5:17** Jesus said,

**"My Father is always at his work, to this very day, and I, too, am working."** We are the body of Christ. We are Christ's ambassadors. We are to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We are to be working. However, it is not us, but Christ in us, who accomplishes things of eternal significance. **Philippians 2:13** says,

**"For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."**

**Matthew 5:14-16** says, **"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."**

**Ephesians 2:10** says,

**"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."**

**Ephesians 4:11-13;16** says,

**"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."**

God has given us a work to do. We do not work to earn our salvation, but because of God's great love for us, he has given us work to do. As we work together and build each other up, we start to see the fullness of Christ. We reach unity in the faith. We become mature. We know more about Christ. How do we build each other up? The answer is there folks. Who can find it? It's four letters. It sums up the Gospel and all of God's work. L O V E.

As we grow in our passion for God, we grow in our compassion for others. When we love on people, they start to see Jesus. Sometimes that love takes work. Like digging in

ditches. Or playing tag with kids. Or forgiving someone. Or changing your lifestyle to accommodate the needs of someone else. Or holding your tongue in an argument. There are many ways. But, I tell you, through those things, people will see Christ alive in our hearts. And the praise will go to God.

Let me tell you more about this God who is working. He is still working to this very day. And he is using his people in that work. I met an old man on my first trip who was a leader in the local evacuation center. He joined our group as we worked in the park. He noticed that there was something “different” about our group from the other volunteer groups in the area. When I went back up to Tohoku for my second trip, many people were saying, “Did you hear about Aoki? Do you know Aoki? You must hear Aoki’s story!” So I saw Aoki, this old man, and asked him about his story. He said, “I saw Jesus. I had a dream and I saw Jesus.” This is how the story goes. Aoki had a dream and Jesus came to him and said, “I love you. I’m proud of you. I have a plan for you. I need you to go find those volunteers you met. They’re going to teach you about me. You need to learn about me.”

The next morning, Aoki woke up and remembered the names of two of the leaders for Be One. He said “Beth and Chad”. He found them and told them to teach him about Jesus. They have a house church now in Ishinomaki and Aoki brings his two good friends with him to learn about this living Jesus. His favorite song is “Amazing Grace”. “The English is better than the Japanese,” he told me. “It really is amazing.” He asked me to sing that song for him a few times, and even after I stopped singing, he kept humming it. This is exciting stuff, folks! We are studying the books of Acts and the coming of the Holy Spirit. This is straight out of the book of Joel: **“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”**

Aoki’s story shows me that God is still working. God is still pouring out His Holy Spirit on people. This is the same sort of stuff that is happening in the Middle East. Muslims who have never heard the Gospel are seeing visions of Jesus and turning their lives over to Christ.

Now, one question I have is why didn’t Jesus just tell Aoki about himself? I wondered this. Aoki had never heard the Gospel, but he met the living Jesus. Why didn’t Jesus just reveal everything to him? Jesus told Aoki to go find some Christian workers who would teach him about Jesus. God is both working and giving us work to do. God does the work of opening people’s eyes to Jesus. We do the tangible work of loving our

neighbor. Somehow God brings it all together. And in the end, we all praise God.

Just coming back from Tohoku and from hearing Aoki's story, I was a little jealous of Aoki. I really want to see Jesus' face! We all asked Aoki what Jesus looked like. He said, "He's clean cut, young, strong, and built a bit like a fisherman. As soon as you see him, you want to be his friend. He is so gentle."

The Sunday after coming back from Tohoku, I needed Pastor Dan's message about Thomas. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. Still, I really want to see Jesus. More than that, I want to hug Jesus. But I am learning that the more I serve others, the more I see Jesus in my brothers and sisters. The more I see Jesus in the faces of people on the street. The more I see Jesus alive in own heart. Maybe hugging you IS hugging Jesus.

**Matthew 25:31-45** is the parable of the sheep and the goats. Let's read it together.

**"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.**

**Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'**

**Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'**

**The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'**

**Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'**

**They will also answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?'**

**He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these,**

**you did not do for me.'**

Like I said at the beginning, I'm still not where I want to be. I want to be a pressing onward. I want to know Christ more. But somehow, I think it is through understanding God's presence, both around us and in us as his people, and through God's work- both around us, in us, and through us, that we really come to know Christ more. We show others Christ as he lives in us. We can also see Christ as we serve each other and see Christ living in each other.

Thanks for letting me share a bit of what God has been teaching me.

Let's pray.