A Moment of Forgiveness and a Moment of Grace[1]

Dr. David Suh was born in the village of Kanggye near the northern border of Korea and China before North and South Korea became separate nations. His father became a pastor during the years Korea was occupied by the Japanese Empire. His father's outspoken resistance to Japanese occupation put them in danger, so they moved to Manchuria closer to the edges of the Japanese empire. Dr. Suh's father sent him to a Japanese middle school because he said, "You must learn the language of the empire." He was attending school the day that empire fell, on August 15th, 1945. He was the only Korean in a class full of Japanese youth. He remembers the Japanese teacher calling the attention of the class to announce that the emperor had just surrendered to end World War II. While his classmates all expressed their grief, he had to hide his feelings of joy. He ran home to his father and celebrated openly with him.

After Japan left Korea, Dr. Suh and his family moved back to their home in the village of Kanggye. Eventually, as the south and north zones became two separate countries in 1948, his father then became outspoken against the communist leadership of the new North Korean administration. Some Christians were joining the communist administration and created the Korean Christian Federation (KCF), urging pastors like his father to join. His father refused, becoming an enemy of the KCF. Thus, the police of North Korea took a negative interest in his father's outspokenness. Eventually they moved further south toward Pyongyang. Five years after Japan surrendered Korea to the Soviet Union and the United States, war flared up again in June of 1950. Soon after the war began, Dr. Suh's father went missing. While wondering who might have taken his father and what they might have done to him, Dr. Suh also had to worry about being picked up by the North Korean army himself and taken to fight in the war, since he was 19 years old in 1950. He and his younger brother would hide in a hole in the floor of his house. His ability to hide did not last forever; however, the kindness of a stranger saved him from likely death on the battlefield.

The North Korean army finally picked him up when the August heat of 1950 got so uncomfortable he had to get out for some fresh air. They trucked him into town and lined him up to see the doctor who was supposed to determine his physical fitness for the war. To his astonishment, the doctor told him, "You are sick." He describes his response, "I don't know what I was thinking at the time, of course I should have said, 'Yes I am sick.' Instead I argued with him, 'No I am not sick, I am healthy.' Thankfully, he insisted, 'No, you are sick.' He gave me a piece of paper that said I was not healthy enough to join the army. I didn't know him, he was not a member of our church. To this day I still have no idea why he decided to do that for me. The easy answer would be to say it was God, I guess?" As he was heading away from the line of young men, he heard his little brother call out to him. The army had also found his little brother. His brother said to him, "Older brother, where are you going? You should be going in that

[1] This story is a summary of an interview of Dr. David Suh (Korean: Suh, Kwang Sun), retired pastor and professor of Ewha University, done by Kurt Esslinger, pastor and mission co-worker of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. assigned to the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK). The interview was broadcast as a webinar hosted by Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ/Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in cooperation with the NCCK Reconciliation and Unification Committee.

[other] direction. We are supposed to go that way to the war." Dr. Suh then showed his brother his medical release paper. His brother then responded, "Okay, older brother. You shouldn't go to war. I will go to the army instead of you." He hasn't seen his little brother since that moment. Dr. Suh explains that these memories make him wonder, "Why am I here, then? What is my purpose if these people did so much to make sure I could survive?" He humbly muses that as old as he is and as many years as he has spent praying, he is still asking himself this question.

After the US won access to North Korea, his family was finally free to look for his father. Eventually they found him. Someone told him his father's body was by the Taedong River in Pyongyang. He went looking, and sure enough he found a group of four other ministers who were executed and tied together. He found his father's body covered in bullet holes and blood. Dr. Suh remembers the anger he felt as he held his father's body, and he remembers the strong desire for revenge.

Dr. Suh then moved to the South. He joined the South Korean Navy as a way to avenge his father. He received another special opportunity when he scored highly on an entrance test. His results gained him access to a program that sent high performing Koreans to study in the US, and a friend he made in the US navy encouraged him to take it up. Near the end of his study at a US school, his friend had him over for dinner and asked him, "What are you going to do next?" Dr. Suh was planning on returning to the Korean navy at that time, but the friend suggested, "No, you are not the navy type. You are a scholar type." His navy friend helped him return to the US and register for a Christian college in Montana. Dr. Suh went on to study theology and then earned admission to Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1962. There he read Bonhoeffer's Letters From Prison, he went to hear Martin Luther King Jr. speak of the Civil Rights Movement in Washington D.C., and he watched his friends and fellow students join in the Civil Rights Movement. He says that this time tested him theologically as he began to reflect on his own attitude toward his enemy and his desire for revenge. He began reflecting theologically on revenge, forgiveness, and "What should be my Christian attitude toward my enemies who killed my father?"

After receiving a PhD from Union Theological Seminary he returned to Korea and joined in the movement for human rights and democratization against the forces of South Korean dictatorship while teaching at Ewha University. At that time Park Jung-Hee, father of the recent former president Park Geun-Hye, was in power, and in the name of anti-communism and pro-USA rhetoric severely oppressed South Korean workers, students, and Christian intellectuals who opposed him. "I thought, 'My father fought against the communist dictator and gave his life for human rights and democracy and freedom in North Korea, and here is this so-called democratic dictator… what is the difference between a communist dictator and a capitalist dictator?' So I should follow my father's example against all dictatorship." That is when he became involved with the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK). Dr. Suh was eventually arrested by South Korean police for "agitating his students to demonstrate against Park Jung-Hee." They forced him to resign his position at Ewha in 1980, which then freed him up to be ordained as a pastor of a local congregation. Despite the pressure from his government, he never ended his involvement in the Korean peace and unification efforts.

This gave Dr. Suh the opportunity to join the NCCK for a consultation in Montreal, Canada in 1991 that included the KCF, his father's old North Korean Christian enemies. There, the head of the North Korean delegation, who shared the same age as Dr. Suh, was the son of one of the founders of the KCF, his

father's main enemy. Both Dr. Suh and this representative of the KCF were set to speak before Canadian church and government leaders as well as representatives of the World Council of Churches.

He describes the encounter: "Then I really struggled the night before. Father, your son is here to talk about peace, and I'm representing South Korean Christians. What do I do? How can I meet this guy? But the following morning right before the meeting started, he came to me and said, 'Dr. Suh, can you translate, interpret my speech?' I said, 'You have your own interpreter who came with you.' He responded, 'No, no, he is no [kind of] interpreter. His English is [not] good. He came here to watch me.' But if I were to help him translate his speech that is a violation of South Korea's National Security Law and I could get arrested. 'Wait a minute, I have to talk with my friends from South Korea.' I went to them to say that guy is asking me to translate his speech. And my friends, my really close friends turned away from me and said, 'Hey that's your business.' What a help?!

"Then I made a decision…. Do I choose revenge or forgiveness? And then I heard a voice, 'Loving your enemy is the real revenge.' Okay, I will do that. So I helped him with translation. Then after him I did my own keynote address representing South Korea. After I did that, it was a small act, but violating South Korean law, helping my North Korean enemy, I felt a sense of freedom from the bondage of thoughts of doing bad things to my enemy. It was like a moment of grace, a chance for me to perform a loving action for my enemy. From then on I felt so free to talk about North Korea, peace, and reconciliation. In 2004 I had a chance to visit Pyongyang and give a sermon in front of a congregation of 300. There I told them about my story [this story], and in Pyongyang they all wept. They are Christians, they are Koreans, and they have the same feelings that I have for peace and unification. Now I am not only free on these issues, but also I have conviction that we may be united once again as brothers and sisters."