

3.25.2020 Lenten mid-week homily

John 10: 7-11, 14:5-6

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

(Uchimura Kanzô)

“The Way and the Door”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen*

The theme of this year’s Lenten mid-week devotion is “Staying Close to Jesus.” In addition to scripture, each week we are focusing on the voice of a Christian writer from the history of the church who also stayed close to Jesus. This week we hear from a Japanese Christian named Uchimura Kanzô (1861-1930). There are two brief passages from his collected writings at the end of this homily, as well as suggested resources for further reading.

Uchimura Kanzô was a Japanese Christian layman, theologian and biblical scholar who lived during a time of rapid change and modernization. Born into a samurai family, he witnessed the end of feudalism and the birth of the democratic monarchy known as the Meiji Period (1868-1912). One of the first to study abroad, Uchimura graduated from Amherst College in Massachusetts, and later worked as an editor of *Yorozu Chôhô*, a daily newspaper in Tokyo. During an era of intense nationalism, colonialism, and war, he became known (and vilified) for his public stance against worshipping the emperor. His study of the New Testament made him an outspoken opponent of war and a staunch pacifist.

Uchimura was the first translator of Martin Luther’s writings into Japanese, and a consistent voice of justification by grace through faith. He is the founder of a lay-driven Japanese Christian movement known as the “Non-church movement.” Uchimura argued that Jesus came not to establish a church with secular and imperial power, but rather Jesus came to gather people into the body of Christ. He discovered that the Greek New Testament word “*ekklesia*,” which is usually translated as “church” actually means “gathering.” Uchimura refused to use the word “church” instead favoring “congregation” (集会) or “gathering” (集い). His reading of the New Testament led him to believe that denominational churches (with clergy, hierarchy, creeds, and competing theologies) were antithetical to Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom and the Spirit’s gathering of human beings into the body of Christ.

For these reasons, Uchimura Kanzô is a great example of a Christian who sought to stay close to Jesus. In the writings that accompany this homily Uchimura clearly states his faith in Jesus as the

way and the door to the Kingdom of God. His unflinching faith in Christ and desire to follow only Christ is helpful for us as we walk the way of the cross during Lent. We, too, are seeking to follow Jesus' call and leading more closely in our lives. Uchimura lived at a time of western colonialism in Asia and even arrogance by western Christians that their historical theological traditions were the only way to Christ. Uchimura believed Jesus' words, "*If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed*" (John 8:36). Through Uchimura's witness to Christ, we hear anew a call to follow the way, the truth and the life, offering true freedom and liberation from the limitations of competing voices in our own cultural and historical context.

Uchimura reminds us that the theology, creeds and structure of the church are only helpful in so far as they point to Christ, allowing the light of Christ to transform and lead us. Above the stairs leading to the pulpit in St. Mark's sanctuary there is a wooden plaque on the wall reading, "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*" These words in John 12:21 remind us that the preaching, liturgy and work of the church must always point to Jesus because it is only the One who was crucified and raised who truly liberates us from the sin and pride that mar our lives and world.

In today's gospel readings Jesus is both the Good Shepherd and the Way. Jesus the door of the sheep reminds us that an abundant life begins not with material things, but with a shepherd to leads us to inner spiritual riches that breathe life and renewal into everything we seek to do as human beings and as a church in the world. Our lives flow outward from our faith in the shepherding presence of Christ Jesus. This is in reverse to what the world often tells us: that possessing more material things will lead to greater satisfaction and peace.

Almost daily we experience more and more being taken away from us in terms of limited access to material goods, limited freedom of mobility, weakening markets, and faltering confidence in public institutions. More than ever we the need to hear the good news that Christ Jesus the Good Shepherd walks with us in the midst of "*the thief [who] comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*"

In 1919 Uchimura Kanzô wrote, "Truly, for me to live is Christ. By faith, he lives in me and causes me to work." Uchimura was writing at the time of the Spanish flu pandemic that infected 23 million people in Japan and a quarter of the world's population. In the midst of our fears, we walk by faith. Daily Christ comes to a frightened humanity, who like Thomas could not see into the future, and says, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*" Christ comes to you today offering a way through the darkness to freedom, hope and life. Amen

**Lent 4 Midweek reading resources: Uchimura Kanzô (1861-1930)**

**“The Way and the Door” 「道と門」**

God looks upon humanity through Christ, and through Christ humanity reaches God. Christ says, “I am the way,” (John 14:6). He is certainly the way by and through which God looks upon humanity, and the way by and through which humanity reaches God. There is no genuine communion between God and humanity without the mediation of Christ. Again, Christ says, “I am the door” (John 10:7). Truly, he is the great shepherd who meets the sheep; the sheep follow him out of the wilderness of the world, and he is the door through which the sheep enter into the sheep-fold of the Kingdom. Christ is the way. Christ is the door. No one can reach the Kingdom of heaven without going through him or apart from him. Indeed, only he is the way, and only he is the door. There is no substitute or alternate way and door in this world. The church is not the way that reaches the Kingdom. Theology, doctrine, the creeds, etc., none of these are the door to enter the Kingdom of heaven. He has said, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). We reach the Father through the mediation of the Son. The church, doctrines, the clergy, etc. are not necessary in order for us to reach the Kingdom.

Originally published in “Biblical Studies” (June, 1916).

Translated by Pastor Timothy McKenzie from Uchimura’s collected works:

『内村鑑三信仰著作全集』 10:148.

**“My Religion” 「余の宗教」**

I don’t work, I simply believe. I don’t pray, I simply believe. I don’t try to sanctify myself, I simply believe. I don’t make my own preparations to enter the Kingdom of heaven, I simply believe. My faith believes in the mercy and love of God, and in the redeeming death of the holy Son of God. This faith causes me to work; causes prayer; causes sanctification; causes preparation for entering the Kingdom of heaven. My religion is completely about faith. There are no works involved. If there is work, it is simply the work of believing. The Lord Jesus Christ is my wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, come from God. He is my everything. Truly, for me to live is Christ. By faith, he lives in me and causes me to work; I become an automated machine of faith; in his hands I become a pure vessel of righteousness. So everything is very simple and very good (1

Corinthians 1:30). It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. For me to live now in the flesh means living in the One who loves me, gave himself up for me; that is, to live believing in the Son of God.

Originally published in “Biblical Studies” (April, 1919).

Translated by Pastor Timothy McKenzie from Uchimura’s collected works:

『内村鑑三信仰著作全集』 16:74.

**Note:** 1 Corinthians 1:30, “*He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*”

### **Book recommendations:**

There is no single collection of Uchimura’s writings available in English translation. However the following books are excellent introductions of his life and work.

Howes, John F., *Japan’s Modern Prophet: Uchimura Kanzô, 1861-1930*. Vancouver/Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2005.

*Living for Jesus and Japan: The Social and Theological Thought of Uchimura*

*Kanzô*. Edited by Shibuya Hiroshi and Chiba Shin, Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2013.

### **Uchimura Kanzô (1861-1930)**

Uchimura Kanzô was a Japanese Christian layman, theologian and biblical scholar whose life bridged systems of feudalism and modernity, imperialism and democracy. He was the first translator of Martin Luther’s writings into Japanese, and a consistent voice of justification by grace through faith. He graduated from Amherst College, and the influence of Pennsylvania Quaker friends left a lasting imprint upon him. His work as a newspaper editor gave his writings both economy of space and power of expression. He is the founder of a lay-driven Japanese Christian movement known as the “Non-church movement,” and from 1899-1930 published a monthly journal titled “Biblical Studies.” His gravestone at Tama Cemetery in Tokyo reads: “I for Japan, Japan for the World, the World for Christ, and All for God.” His theological convictions about freedom in Christ made him a prophetic voice for social justice, pacifism, patriotism and internationalism. Proud of his country and its culture, Uchimura believed that God works through culture and language in the proclamation of the gospel.