

7.15.2020 Midweek Meditation, Week 5
Job 32:8; Matthew 16:15; Galatians 3:28

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(UCCJ Confession / Uchimura Kanzo)

“The Breath of the Almighty”

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

Last week we encountered Robert Hood’s question, “Must God Remain Greek?” It is a significant question that reveals the special status accorded to Greek language, philosophy and culture in the background of the New Testament world. A similar question, “Must God Remain Western?” might also be asked with reference about our own assumed cultural status. I pose this question because, though God is not “Western,” the imperial and colonial structures under which the church historically engaged in mission has very definitely left this impression in certain parts of the world. Further, I need to be very clear at this point in this series that because I am not Japanese, I do not speak as a representative of Japanese culture. Though I speak, read and write Japanese, I am nevertheless Western in my inherited cultural and linguistic worldview, and it is only from this linguistic and cultural location that I am able to offer my own views and story.

This simple but profound truth about self-identity was driven home to me while working as a young pastor in Japan serving Japanese language congregations. As a foreign pastor of Japanese congregations, I was often the only non-Japanese person in the building. In hindsight I should have been prepared to hear God speaking through scripture in new ways, but regrettably, I was not. So I was surprised when members of my weekly Bible study group found certain passages of scripture both consoling and empowering - passages that I often simply rolled right over because they were not part of my own experience and the socio-cultural lenses with which I had read the Bible.

I remember one day in particular. We were reading Matthew chapter 5, and one verse really spoke to everyone in the room (except the lone Westerner): “*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*” Members of my Bible study reacted to these words, sharing how they had felt oppressed or persecuted for their faith by family and in society. They shared how they were often the only Christians in their families, and a religious minority in a predominantly Buddhist world.

This experience was eye opening for me, because I realized with visceral force something I was scarcely prepared for: I had never experienced being reviled or persecuted for my faith. Quite the opposite, I had experienced a sense of privilege and cultural superiority as a Christian. The witness of my Japanese sisters and brothers was an experience for which I remain deeply grateful. God was speaking through the witness of fellow Christians.

During this time in my life I was elected chairperson of a Lutheran association with substantial financial assets. My name was registered with the Japanese government as “the Representative,” a generic sounding term, meaning I was the responsible individual and the legal representative of the organization. I was also elected president of the American Lutheran Missionary Association, a position that placed me on the executive council of the national church, and also on the national personnel committee with District Presidents (bishops) of the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church. I was in my mid-thirties and involved in matters of responsibility that far outstripped my experience and abilities. Fortunately, I was surrounded with able and capable staff, a gifted board of directors,

and national church leaders who were generous with their time in helping me grow. For my part, I worked hard and sought to be diligent in parish ministry and in my administrative work.

At that time, however, I was unaware that the administrative structures I was leading and responsible for had a direct lineage to nineteenth century structures of colonialism that had allowed Western churches and missionaries to maintain systems of self-organization and polity in countries with which their governments had established treaties. In Japan's case the earliest treaties, known as the *Ansei Treaties*, were negotiated in 1858 by Japan with the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, and the Netherlands, and were rightly known as the "unequal treaties" (不平等条約). These treaties remained in effect until 1899, though by then they were no longer completely enforceable since Japan's stature had grown after its defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War. Though Japan was never "colonized," treaty ports and "foreign settlements" (外国人居留地) were established with Western treaty nations, as Japan was simultaneously also becoming a colonizing power in Asia.

This period of unequal treaties and colonial interests in Asia had expanded rapidly from the period of the Opium Wars onward, as Western nations established the treaty port system with "concessions" and "settlements" that allowed Western nations and their citizens to gain residence and conduct commerce and trade, first in China, then in Japan and Korea. These treaties were called "unequal" for two main reasons: extraterritoriality and duties. Extraterritoriality meant that foreign residents who committed offenses in a host nation could not be tried under the laws of that nation, but were handed over to their respective consulates to be tried under the laws of their own nations. Secondly, under these treaties, low fixed import-export duties were set by the foreign treaty nations. These two conditions denied the sovereignty of the host nation by granting "unequal" privilege to Western colonial nations. Christian churches and their missionaries participated in and benefited from these structures of colonial power through religious provisions drafted into these treaties.

In Japan, most of these "colonial" era structures were dismantled before and after the Second World War. However, as I experienced, remnants of these colonial era structures continued to exist in many denominations working in Japan. The Lutheran organizations I worked within had been established nearly one hundred years prior to my assuming leadership in them, and except for the period of the war when the Lutheran Association was under Japanese leadership and the missionary association had been abandoned, it was always assumed that after the war Western missionaries would continue fiduciary oversight of these organizations.

So when I led that Bible study on Matthew and heard the witness of my Japanese church members' own experiences of systemic persecution in their own cultural context, I was as yet, unable to see my own participation in a global structure of Western privilege for which my being their foreign pastor with possession of administrative oversight was but an ongoing symptom of historical assumptions about privileges enjoyed by Western personnel in their host nations.

Jesus asks, "*But who do you say that I am?*" (Mt. 16:15). From the beginnings of Protestantism in Japan in 1859, when missionaries gained entry to Japan based upon unequal treaties, Japanese Christians had asked themselves if they should not write their own creeds to be confessed alongside the historical creeds inherited from Western churches. In 1893 at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, a Japanese pastor named Kozaki Hiromichi addressed the gathered delegates about Christianity in Japan. Pastor of Reinanzaka Church in Tokyo and president of

Doshisha University, Kozaki noted that though Japanese churches had adopted Western models of church polity such as Presbyterian or Reformed models, they had refused to call their churches by these names, preferring Japanese terms like “*Itschi kyōkai*” (United church) and “*Kumiai kyōkai*” (Associated church). Kozaki also noted that Japanese churches had taken up the issue of whether or not to write their own creeds. Kozaki said, “Japanese Christians must solve all these problems by themselves,” hinting at the crucial idea that a confession of faith must be made in one’s own words and language. In 1954 the United Church of Christ in Japan developed and ratified its own creed at its annual national assembly.

Jesus’ question, “*But who do you say that I am?*” is a living question that people need to answer for themselves, and one that no person may answer in place of another. By extension, this also means that Western churches, their sending mission boards, and church agencies often assumed they could provide an answer to the question of confession by simply teaching the historical creeds, Western ecclesiastical polity, and Western theology. As South African missiologist David Bosch has pointed out, “The ‘civilized’ not only felt superior to the ‘uncivilized’, but also responsible for them” (*Transforming Mission*, 1991:312). Yet as Japanese theologian Uchimura Kanzō argued in an earlier generation, “*But truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding*” (Job 32:8). Where the Japanese spirit comes in contact with the breath of the Almighty, there, Japanese Christianity will exist.”

We continue to live in a world of assumed superiority of Western models of theology and church polity. This assumption is an unfortunate legacy that began with late medieval Roman Catholic colonialism and continued with colonialism by Western Protestant nations through five centuries of shifting colonial, imperial, and neocolonial power. I know these structures exist because I lived and traveled under them, benefited from their protection, administered them, sought to protect them, and finally participated in dismantling a small part of them.

In 2007, as president of the American Lutheran Missionary Association, I drafted the letter that dismantled what was left of this missionary association in Japan, removing a small remnant of colonial era privilege. I tell this story because I participated first hand in Western colonial structures that continue to exist in our world as an assumed sense of Western and often “white” privileged status that is both global and local. Five centuries later we continue to see the effects of colonialism through continuing problems of racism and systemic discrimination, as well as their impact upon diplomacy and foreign relations with nations that were at one time colonized. Until the scope of this historical legacy is recognized, we will never grasp why things are the way they are. This legacy of colonialism is, as David Bosch has argued, “an integral part of the much wider and much more serious project of the advance of Western technological civilization” (Bosch 1991:312).

My story is not unique and I am grateful and blessed to have been profoundly nurtured in the Christian faith in another language and through the examples of faithful and committed Japanese Christians. However imperfectly, Japanese has become a language of the heart into which “*the breath of the Almighty that makes for understanding*” (Job 32:8) has given me an understanding and insight into both structural sinfulness, the necessity of naming it, and the joy of being a servant in the church rather than “the Representative.” Only through seeing who we are, in both the blessings and the sinful inheritances of the past, will we be able to finally find redemption and release. Amen.

Week 5 midweek meditation readings:

1) “Japanese Christianity” by Uchimura Kanzô

Japanese Christianity is not a special kind of Christianity. Japanese Christianity is Christianity received directly by Japanese people from God without having to go through the mediation of foreign persons. What this means is easy to see and understand. In this sense there is German Christianity, English Christianity, Scottish Christianity, American Christianity, and also Christianity existing in all other nations. In this way, and in this sense, Japanese Christianity must also exist. Indeed, it already exists, “*But truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding.*” (Job 32:8). Where the Japanese spirit comes in contact with the breath of the Almighty, there, Japanese Christianity will exist. This Christianity is free. It is independent. It is original. It is productive. True Christianity is complete. There is no one who is saved by the faith of another. And in the same way, no country is saved by the religion of another country. Even if the religion of America or the religion of England were the best there is, it could not save Japan. Only Japanese Christianity will be able to save Japan and the Japanese. (Originally published in *Biblical Studies*, December 1920. Translated from Japanese by Timothy McKenzie).

2) The United Church of Christ in Japan - The Confession of Faith:

We believe and confess that:

The Old and New Testaments, inspired of God, testify to Christ, reveal the truth of the Gospel, and are the sole canon upon which the Church should depend. By the Holy Spirit the Holy Bible is the Word of God which gives us full knowledge of God and salvation, and is the unerring standard of faith and life.

The One God, revealed by the Lord Jesus Christ, and testified to in the Holy Scripture, being Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the triune God. The Son, who become man, for the salvation of us sinners was crucified and made our redemption by offering Himself to God as the perfect sacrifice once for all.

God chooses us by His grace, and by faith in Christ alone He forgives our sins and justifies us. In this unchangeable grace the Holy Spirit accomplishes His work by sanctifying us and causing us to bear fruits of righteousness.

The Church is the Body of Christ the Lord, and is the congregation of those who are called by grace. The church observes public worship, preaches the Gospel aright, administers the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and being diligent in works of love, waits in hope for the coming again of the Lord.

Thus we believe, and with the saints in all ages we confess the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

(Enacted Oct. 26, 1954. Official English Translation approved Oct. 24, 1968 by the 15th Kyodan General Assembly. In accordance with the Executive Committee action of Feb. 24, 1969, this English version is primarily for information and not to restrict the original meaning of the Japanese version.) *From the UCCJ website.*

Reading recommendations:

Drummond, Richard H., *A History of Christianity in Japan*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971.
Howes, John F., *Japan's Modern Prophet: Uchimura Kanzô, 1861-1930*. Vancouver/Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2005.
Koyama, Kosuke, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai; A Critique of Idols*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984.
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 during a time of intense nationalism. Proud of his country and its culture, Uchimura believed that God works through all cultures and languages.

United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ, 日本キリスト教団)

The UCCJ was founded in June 1941 as a union church of all Protestant churches in Japan at that time. However, the roots of the UCCJ go back to 1859 and the first missionaries to arrive in Japan, as well as 1872 and the founding of Yokohama Kaigan Church, the oldest Protestant church in Japan. The UCCJ's founding in 1941 was a forcible merger by the imperial government of Japan through a law named the Religious Bodies Law. This law was an attempt to create a nationalist Christian church in support of Japan's imperial, colonial and wartime agendas. Foreign churches and missionaries were barred from membership and leadership in the new church. After the war, denominations that wished to retain a separate denominational identity left the UCCJ (Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Holiness, Assemblies of God, some of the Presbyterians and Reformed, were among those traditions that left the wartime UCCJ and reconstituted themselves as denominations after the war). Today the UCCJ is the largest Protestant denomination in Japan. In 1954 it adopted its own "*Confession of Faith*," and in 1967 it adopted a "*Confession on the Responsibility During World War II*" for its complicity with the Japanese government during the Second World War. Today the UCCJ has relationships with many educational institutions, notably Tokyo Union Theological Seminary (1930) and Doshisha University in Kyoto (1875). The UCCJ was a founding member of the World Council of Churches in 1948.