

7.29.2020 Midweek Meditation, Week 7

Hosea 6:6; Romans 1:17 (Series verse: Gal. 3:28)

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

(Kosuke Koyama)

“Mercy not Sacrifice”

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

In this week’s meditation we encounter the thought of Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, who was professor of ecumenics at Union Theological Seminary. Koyama was concerned with the presence of evil and violence in the world, which he observed in the history of the West as the cause of enormous suffering for Jewish and black peoples. Koyama asked the question, “Why is the Western civilization, informed by Christianity – so violent?” Koyama argued that a theology of “superseding” in which Christ is understood as having superseded the “old” covenant with the Jewish people, therefore providing a final answer to all other religions, is a root cause for Christian feelings of religious and cultural superiority in what has been experienced geopolitically as the West. Koyama writes,

I noticed that the theology of superseding has given to Christians a specious sense of superiority, not only over Jews, but over peoples of other faiths as well, an attitude that has contributed to the increase of violence in the world. A sense of superiority too quickly becomes a self-righteous complex that generates violence.

These hard words may come as a surprise to many, but they will be familiar to anyone who has worked in the global church or is familiar with the history of the Western colonial and missionary enterprise over the past five hundred years. Koyama admits that violence is a universal human problem but asks why it has been such a problem for the West, which has demonstrated attitudes of superiority and self-righteousness over other ethnicities, nations, and religions. The origin of this superiority and the violence it manifests can be found in a misunderstanding of Christ and his cross. For Koyama the universality of Jesus the Jew became “superseded” by a Christology that led to a sense of Christian superiority as something that needed to be asserted over others. However, for Koyama, Jesus and his cross is the place where God’s grace defeats violence with universal love and mercy.

I first encountered the *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) during seminary in the writings of Martin Luther. In the “Heidelberg Disputation,” Luther compared two kinds of theology, the “theology of glory” and the “theology of the cross.” Writing at the end of the medieval age, Luther argued that humanity preferred a “theology of glory” seeking to glorify the sacrifice of human “good works,” what was known as “*facere quod in se est*” or “doing what is in oneself.”

In contrast Luther argued that people must “despair of their own ability before they are prepared to receive the grace of Christ” for it is grace through faith that causes good works. Luther wrote,

God can be found only in suffering and the cross... Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God’s (*Luther’s Works* 31:53).

Rather than the sacrifice of one’s own works, it is only by being encountered by the love of the cross that people become wise, righteous, and just. Luther summed up the *theologia crucis*, “The love of God which lives in humanity loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong” (*LW* 31:57). God’s love frees humanity to be merciful and loving.

The *theologia crucis* is a theology of incarnation in which Christ and his cross dwell in the believer, transforming sin and evil into righteousness and good. What is crucial for Luther and Koyama is that

hidden in the suffering of the cross, people experience the cross as God's grace revealed in love.

For Koyama, the Creator God is a self-giving God, seen most clearly in the cross which rejects the evil of human greed and self-righteousness. For God, greed is not a viable option for human history, only the self-giving love of God seen in the cross can be the goal of history. Yet human history has been tragically marked by greed for power, wealth, land, and the conquest of others that has often resulted in violence. Koyama reflected upon this history and his own theological education lamenting, "Only rarely had my professors mentioned the violence of the Crusades, of the Inquisition, of the colonization and settling of the Americas, of slavery, and of the Holocaust."

Koyama noted that in the colonizing impulse of the West, "self-sacrifice" was often another name for the "self-protection" and "self-righteousness" that marked its experience with other ethnicities, nations and religions. Koyama writes, "We need to remember that *theologia crucis* is a doctrine of love, not sacrifice. The predicament of black people has compelled me to meditate upon the words of the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (6:6). Koyama wrote,

The primary duty of *theologia crucis* is to confront violence and destroy it. Grace is global. Violence also is global. My New York *theologia crucis* began to have the two themes simultaneously: grace and violence. I came to understand that grace is the grace of God, but it must become our inner power to resist and eradicate violence as personally demonstrated by Martin Luther King, Jr. In this empowerment the grace of God becomes real.

Grace is, therefore, a gift meant to help us in the everyday, the "now" of human existence. Grace is meant to enable human beings to become merciful, to become fully human – alive with God's presence. Only when grace becomes the indwelling power to live with love and mercy, rather than by sacrifice and self-righteousness, will God's love defeat the evil of violence in all its human and systemic forms.

Koyama links this defeat of evil to the Eucharist, writing that the evil of human violence is a mystery that is countered only in the mystery of the Eucharist. Jesus hidden in the mystery of suffering and the cross, reveals himself hidden in the Eucharist. God hides God's self in order to reveal God's self. The words "This is my body, given for you," reveal grace that becomes the indwelling power to resist and eradicate violence. With hands outstretched, a posture that is the very antithesis of self-righteousness, humanity receives the mystery of incarnating grace that has the power to replace evil with good, creating a new human community in which all people – Jews, blacks, Asians, Africans, and every nation – can share their story of God's grace and love. Only with all people gathered at the Lord's table sharing their stories of suffering and grace will violence finally be overcome with mercy and love. Amen.

### **Week 7 midweek meditation readings:**

(Excerpts) *Water Buffalo Theology* by Kosuke Koyama [pages 176-179]

In 1974 I left Singapore for New Zealand, where I was senior lecturer in religious studies at the University of Otago. Six years later, in 1980, I received a long-distance call from Donald Shriver, president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, inviting me to become professor of ecumenics and world Christianity. In this exciting environment I experienced a "bombing" quite different from that I had known during the wartime of my youth. There, for the first time, I encountered the Jewish and black peoples. New York abruptly forced me to respond theologically to the fact of enormous violence suffered by these two peoples. My concept of theology, which is ecumenical by nature, did not allow me the excuse that I come from a land in which these two peoples had no historical connections. I sensed that my identity would be directly threatened if I did not come to terms with the two-fold

encounter. My happy confidence that I was bringing the excitement of Asia to Union was thus shaken soon after I came.

In Asia I had learned that culture is an extremely ambiguous concept. The male-dominated culture of China, in its ten centuries of foot binding, had crippled one billion women. For centuries Hindu caste culture has delegated millions to lives of hopeless poverty and despair. In my Asian thinking, I had come to a *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) in which love, becoming completely vulnerable to violence, conquers violence. In my Asian *theologia crucis* “Christ and culture” and “Christ and liberation” were united. New York approved the essential relatedness of the two, but it questioned my *theologia crucis*.

The experience of blacks and Jews challenged the heart of the Christian faith as I understood it at the time. I came to see that their critical appraisal of Christian faith derives from their historical experience of violence. It is sad to know that Christian theology and the church have participated in the violence they suffered. These two peoples are a symbol representing millions of other people who have suffered violence and perished in the course of human history. Their very presence in our midst raises the ultimate question of violence in human civilization...

I noticed that the theology of superseding has given to Christians a specious sense of superiority, not only over Jews, but over peoples of other faiths as well, an attitude that has contributed to the increase of violence in the world. A sense of superiority too quickly becomes a self-righteous complex that generates violence.

Theologically, I began to notice a difference between the Jesus I had known in Tokyo and the Jesus I found in New York. My Tokyo Jesus was the divine redeemer of the Gentiles. His Gospel could be proclaimed without making one reference to the Jewish people of today. There is Christology in Tokyo.

In New York, however, Jesus is, first of all, a Jewish person of great spiritual stature. And equally important as Jesus of Nazareth is the name of Rabbi Akiba. There is no Christology here. One has to come to New York to experience Jesus the Jew without a trace of Christology. This absence of Christology shakes the foundation of the Christian faith. The *theologia crucis* may speak of the theology of the Suffering Servant of God (Isa. 53) but nothing more. What the name of Jesus stands for is no more than a part of the historical experience of the people of Israel. In the same way that the message of Jeremiah is universal, Jesus is universal. Jesus in New York is “down-sized.” Here, he is no longer *vere Deus vere homo*.

A critical moment came to me when I finally came to feel the enormity of evil of the holocaust of European Jewry. In Asia I had been able to engage in theology at a safe distance from Auschwitz. In New York that distance once and for all disappeared. All civilizations are violent, I saw. But why should Christian civilization be so especially violent?

Again, in Asia I had engaged in theological work at a safe distance from the history and the effects of black slavery in the United States. Even in my student days in New Jersey, only rarely had my professors mentioned the violence of the Crusades, of the Inquisition, of the colonization and settling of the Americas, of slavery, and of the Holocaust. Asians are color-conscious racists. Yet it took New York to confront me with the violence of racism. For the first time in my life I asked what has seemed a strange question. Was Jesus white? Was Augustine black? The New Testament and the creeds of the church never mention the color of Jesus. The enormity of the suffering of black people in the time of slavery and the continuing reality of vicious racism today has made me speak carefully about *theologia crucis*...

The primary duty of *theologia crucis* is to confront violence and destroy it. Grace is global. Violence also is global. My New York *theologia crucis* began to have the two themes simultaneously: grace and violence. I came to understand that grace is the grace of God, but it must become our inner power to resist and eradicate violence as personally demonstrated by Martin Luther King, Jr. In this empowerment the grace of God becomes real.

The power of bombs is naked violence. The Hindus say that those who bomb others will eventually bomb themselves...The final test for the truthfulness of the *theologia crucis* is whether this Christian teaching truly contributes toward the removal of violence in the world...The *oikomene* Christ loves is full of violence. Bombing is going on everywhere. Every bomb strikes at the God of Jesus Christ. Every bomb is a denial of the “breath of God” that came into our nostrils (Gen. 2:7). Does not this one word – *bombing* – characterize our mode of human life upon this planet in the twentieth century? Perhaps in different ways, previous centuries were as violent as ours...Why is the human being so violent? Why are all civilizations – but in particular, why is the Western civilization, informed by Christianity – so violent? The source of human violence is a mystery. It takes the mystery of the Eucharist to counter it. Someday, with the help of the Jewish people, black people, and many others, I may be able to stammer out a few words about the mystery of the Eucharist that can expose the mystery of violence and thus move toward its elimination more courageously and intelligently.

My pilgrimage in mission began with my uncomprehending reading of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. I have lived all my life from one war to another. My experience of bombing has caused me to be less interested in individual salvation or a blessed eternity after death, and more passionate about salvation now, in this life. Christian “eschatology” is focused on the present. For me the Christian mission is to bring forth the wholesomeness of abundant life to all upon the earth. In this way, perhaps *only* in this way, can we proclaim confidently and joyously the name of Christ.

**Reading recommendation:**

Koyama, Kosuke, *Water Buffalo Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974, 1999 (25<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed.).

Koyama, Kosuke, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Critique of Idols*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985.

Luther, Martin, *Luther’s Works (Vol. 31)*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957.

**Kosuke Koyama** (1929-2009) was the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Professor of Ecumenics and World Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City from 1980 until 1996. Born to Christian parents in Tokyo, Japan, he studied at Tokyo Union Theological Seminary, graduated from Drew Theological Seminary, and received a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1959. In 1960 he and his wife were sent as missionaries to Thailand by the United Church of Christ Japan. He taught theology at Thailand Theological Seminary in Chiangmai; served as Dean of the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology; and from there taught on the faculty of Religious Studies at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. His works explore themes of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, as well as liberation theology and ecology. As a theologian who lived in various cultural contexts, he worked from the vantage points of East and West, among other crossroads of culture and language. His work titled *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai* uses these locations to describe different cosmological, eschatological, and historical worldviews. His last work, published in Japanese, was *Theology and Violence: Towards A Theology of Nonviolent Love* (Tokyo: Kyo Bun Kwan, 2009).