

“Surely not I, Lord”

**Week 5:** Sadao Watanabe, *The Last Supper* (1978)

For the next few weeks this series will look at images of Christ from the global church. Early Christianity, the Christianization of Europe, the Reformation, and the movement of God’s mission into every region of the world has meant the translation of the gospel into language, culture and ritual through art, architecture, music and literature. This week we encounter the work of Sadao Watanabe (渡辺禎雄, 1913-1996), a Japanese Christian artist who used Japanese patterns, color and printing techniques. His integration of faith and art witness to the intersection of Christ and culture, and the need for the good news of Christ to become rooted in the everyday of people’s lives through the inculturation of the gospel. In this way theology is



always local in its application. As Luther translated the Bible into German, so too, artists give visual expression to the salvation story.

Sadao Watanabe was born in Tokyo, growing up during a period of heightened nationalism and Japanese colonialism in Asia. His father died when he was ten, and he began apprenticing for a fabric dyer. Watanabe was first introduced to Christianity by a neighbor who was a school teacher, and baptized in his mid-teens. He described his first impression of Christianity, saying, “In the beginning I had a negative reaction to Christianity. The atmosphere was full of ‘the smell of butter,’ so foreign to the ordinary Japanese.” This idiom about butter is often used to describe anything reeking of foreignness, in this case for Watanabe, it was Christianity.

Watanabe followed his interest in the art of fabric dyeing,

studying with Keisuke Serizawa, who practiced the Okinawan dyeing technique of *bingata* using paper stencils. Watanabe’s artwork is therefore a further development of *bingata*, not on fabric, but on handmade paper. Because of this Watanabe is often associated with the folk art movement (*mingei undō*) of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that reintroduced traditional arts in Japan.

Watanabe’s *The Last Supper* is a tour de force of inculturating the gospel in its use of

Japanese patterns, motifs and color. Rather than realism, Watanabe used pattern and symbol to draw the viewer into the reality of the biblical narrative. Compositionally, Christ and the disciples wear kimonos, formally seated on the floor around a low table covered with a Japanese tablecloth, rather than being seated on chairs behind a table, as many Western paintings portray them. Watanabe is a bit closer to the custom of the New Testament period of reclining at meals.

The lower half of the table contains a round tray of sushi, and at the top, sits a large red seabream (*madai*), a fish traditionally served on festive occasions. The table is set with earthenware plates in Japanese patterns, and Japanese candles (*warosoku*) made from nuts of the sumac tree. Though the patterns and foods are Japanese, the faces of Christ and the disciples achieve a universal sense of humanity that transcends ethnicity.

Watanabe has depicted Matthew 26, verses 20-25: “*When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, ‘Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.’ And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’ ... Judas, who betrayed him, said, ‘Surely not I, Rabbi?’ He replied, ‘You have said so.’*” As Christ points to himself, the disciples also raise their hands as if to say, “*Surely not I, Lord.*” Christ and the disciples face outward like figures in a Byzantine icon, except for Judas Iscariot, who has turned from view while holding a cloth bag behind his back containing thirty pieces of silver. Though hidden in shame from the viewer, the figure of Christ looks across at him.

Watanabe’s work reminds us that we, too, have often said to Christ, “*Surely not I, Lord.*” Yet like all of the disciples who later abandoned Jesus, we have each abandoned Christ and neighbor in their hour of need. The presence of Judas only heightens the smug drama of disciples who would all abandon Christ and is a reminder that we, too, are always in need of the forgiveness and new creation that Christ works in all who receive from his table.

Watanabe’s print is a reminder that we need to see ourselves and our culture in God’s salvation story. When Jesus commissioned the disciples, saying, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,*” he sent his followers in mission to gather all peoples, promising “*I am with you to the end of the age*” (Mt. 28:18-20). Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” is a command to inculturate the gospel in all nations and languages.

John’s gospel proclaims: “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (1:14),” affirming that when Christ is among us we also become fully human. Gathered *around* the table at the holy supper Jesus’ followers are united in their shared humanity with Christ who mediates heaven and earth, drawing us together out of our isolation, division and fears of one another. The body of Christ, the church, is human community transcending national and ethnic difference. Christ desires all nations come to him in his holy supper, and in Christ all become one.

Beyond the everyday patterns of pottery and kimonos, the pattern of a new humanity gathering around the body and blood of Christ Jesus signals the inbreaking of God’s eternal kingdom among every culture and language. Christ and his meal are *the new pattern* for true human community and fellowship. Watanabe’s print is a “vision” of the kingdom as all people “*bring into it the honor and glory of the nations*” (Revelation 21:26). Christ transforms nations, cultures and humanity, giving honor and glory to the cultures we live within. In the midst of human brokenness, hatred, and sin, we glimpse divine unity, love and forgiveness. At the Lord’s table our words “*Surely not I, Lord,*” are forgiven and we are again sent out to “*make disciples of all nations.*” May Christ work in us a new creation so that, in breaking bread with all peoples, we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus, be with us to the end of the age.” Amen.