

ECHOES OF ASIAN VOICES



Scripture:

Psalm 9:1-2, 9-10

1. I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.
2. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.
9. The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.
10. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek.

Matthew 28:16-20

16. Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.
17. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.
18. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
19. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
20. and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'



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Last Tuesday I returned from six days as an official observer at the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Minneapolis.

This was a very special week for me, since I roomed with my son Peter, who was a representative of San Francisco Theological Seminary. My grandson Taylor was also there as a Young Adult Advisory Delegate representing our Presbytery of the Redwoods. Three generations of Crouches at one international church gathering! I'm still excited about that! In the words of Psalm 9, which Alice just read, "I give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart!"

The Assembly reminded me all over again that we Presbyterians are an international community of faith. This General Assembly had advisory guests from Presbyterian Churches in more than twenty countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America including: The Church of Christ in Thailand, Presbyterian Churches of Iraq,

Presbyterian Synod of Syria & Lebanon, Presbyterian Church in Ghana, Presbyterian Churches of Korea, Rwanda, Venezuela, Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt, Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, and the United Presbyterian Church of Brazil, to name just a few.

One highlight of the Assembly for me was the opening worship last Sunday. We have shared some of the liturgy this morning. More than six-thousand people joined together in The Apostles' Creed! Scripture was read in English, Spanish and Korean. With a combined choir of three-hundred voices we sang "I Was There to Hear your Borne Cry," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "Every Time I Feel the Spirit," and "All Creatures of Our God and King." We prayed together the Lord's Prayer, and celebrated the Sacrament of Holy Communion, passing rice crackers and a small chalice from person to person. It took a very large number of ushers to serve the elements to six-

thousand Presbyterians and their guests in little more than ten minutes.

THE PREACHER

The preacher for the opening worship was Rev. Bruce Reyes Chow of San Francisco, completing his two-year term as Moderator of the General Assembly. He challenged us to “discover what it means to be Presbyterian now, to discover together the will of God and the mind of Christ, as the Holy Spirit comes alive... and God continues to surprise us!”

Bruce said, “This old American denomination needs to be Presbyterian in a new way in order to welcome new generations [of believers in Jesus Christ.]”

As I participated in this moving service with Presbyterians from around the world, I was immediately reminded of Jesus’ words at the end of Matthew’s Gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES

The fact that we have Christian churches throughout the world is a testament to the faith and vision of early missionaries who responded to Christ’s challenge to go and make disciples of all nations.

Although it is true that some early missionaries were motivated by the fear that people of other religions were in eternal jeopardy, most mission co-workers I have personally known or read about over the years have seen themselves as people sharing the love of Christ through their work not only in schools, hospitals and churches, but through new farming techniques, ways to access clean water and provide help in times of natural disasters—Haiti, Indonesia, New Orleans.

Theologian Brian Blount reminds us “the gospel of Matthew is church-building literature, a blueprint . . . to carry [Jesus’ teachings of God’s love and mercy] beyond Israel to all nations, making disciples and widening the scope and impact of the church they compose and promote. . . The church, by its living witness to Jesus’ merciful and transformative ministry . . . maintain[s] the presence of Jesus in the world.”

MISSION CO-WORKERS IN THAILAND

As Alice told you this morning, she and I started our ministry as mission co-workers in the Church of Christ in Thailand.

One of the first young Asian theologians I met in Bangkok was Dr. Kosuke Koyama, who came to Thailand at the same time we did in 1960. Koh and his family came as missionaries from the Church of Christ in Japan to the Church of Christ in Thailand. After we finished language study together for a year and a half in Bangkok, Koh went north to Chiang Mai to teach at the seminary, and I went south to work with Thai and Chinese Christians in the church and school in Petburi.

I have always admired Dr. Koyama’s keen intellect. Writing at the time of the Vietnam War, he said: “God loves the whole world and therefore feels deep pain because of how humans treat each other. Love is rooted in pain in Japanese culture. God refrains from revealing just how deeply God suffers silently on our behalf. In order to make others live, God’s Son [Jesus] silently takes the conflict between God and humanity into his own heart and endures it.”

CO-PASTORS

A young Thai pastor, [whose picture you saw earlier] Rev. Tiewtawat Pantupong, was co-pastor with me of the church in Petburi and co-chaplain at the mission school. We often made pastoral calls riding tandem on a motor scooter. Our shared ministry demonstrated a new style of relationship between a mission co-worker and a local pastor. With Tiewtawat and his wife Woranut, Alice and I revisited Petburi a few years ago and had a

wonderful reunion with former students who are now teachers at the mission school.

A NEW GENERATION

One of the first Thai pastors I met in Bangkok was Rev. Goson Srisang as he returned from post-graduate work at Princeton Seminary. He was our age—early twenties—and he represented the new generation of Thai church leaders and theologians. He quickly became known for speaking out and challenging the viewpoints of older church leaders—both Thai and mission co-workers. This was not something they were used to and didn't immediately appreciate; however he later became Moderator of the Church of Christ in Thailand.

In our early days in Thailand, Goson became a good friend, and together we wrestled with the important question: *“How can the Gospel take root and grow in different cultures without losing the Gospel’s refreshing and challenging uniqueness, and without sacrificing the uniqueness of the culture in which it is growing?”* That is a question which Presbyterian Church leaders around the world, including those at General Assembly this year, are still discussing fifty years later.

The words Goson used to describe issues in the Thai Church still echo in my memory: “Our society or social order is facing a kind of crisis. We yearn for freedom and also for human rights. Sometimes our yearning for freedom and our yearning for national security come into conflict. We are searching for meaning and values that are not imposed on us from the outside, but which are achieved, recovered, and dreamed by our own people. What is the Christian contribution to this searching? We are used to being Christians (or we could say Presbyterians) in a certain way and it is difficult to change.”

**I think we still find it difficult to change!
Here at Church of the Roses,
Goson’s question echoes for us:
how can we be faithful to the gospel of Jesus
Christ, which in many ways stands over
against the popular customs and culture
of our own society and country?**

AN ASIAN THEOLOGY

My ministry and theology has also been deeply influenced by Asian theologian C.S. Song. He is from Taiwan, and has taught at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. He is an example of Asian Christians working to understand the language and feelings, history and culture of biblical times in light of their own language, feelings, history and culture.

Dr. Song reminds us that the culture in the time of Jesus is far closer to Asian culture than it is to western culture. He represents the effort, over many decades now, to develop an indigenous Asian theology.

Dr. Song echoes Dr. Koyama’s insights: He writes: “Love without pain is not love. It is infatuation, illusion, a dream. But love with pain is entirely something else: it is a new creation; it is redemption... *Love that pains—this is God’s love for us. Love that pains and heals—this is the Cross; love that pains and heals and gives new life—this is the Resurrection.*

He continues, “Jesus is the love of God . . . he is the hope of God that people manifest in the midst of despair . . . Jesus becomes real when people, with unflagging faith in God, engage each other to bring about a new world . . . Jesus is the light of God’s salvation that men, women, and children kindle in the darkness. . . Jesus is the story of such people: the poor, the weak and fearful, the forgotten people of the world who live with so much pain and suffering.”

It is inspiring to me that Dr. Song’s understanding of Jesus’ care and concern for poor and suffering people is so close to the thoughts and values that have been important to me in my own ministry.

AN ASIAN VOICE

An Asian voice I will always remember is the voice of Dr. Sirirat Pusurinkam (whose picture at graduation and with the children you saw during the Minute for Mission earlier). While serving as pastor of a large church in Chiang Rai, she has established an AIDS ministry and an orphanage for

children whose parents have died of AIDS. These children come and go in Sirirat's home as if they were her own children.

At a recent conference, Sirirat said: "The church has a mission to work for the liberation of all oppressed people. Christ is the foundation of this mission. We should be working hand in hand and should study the problems of our society to find solutions together, encouraged by prayer and study of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ."

These are just a few of the echoes of Asian voices that I wanted to share with you this morning—voices of Bruce Reyes Chow, Kosuke Koyama, Goson Srisang, C.S. Song, and Sirirat Pusurinkham.

Let me close with a few more words of C. S. Song, theologian from Taiwan:

"Without faith, one cannot rise above the wrongs of yesterday. It is faith that maintains you as a human being. It is faith that rescues you from yesterday and gives you today, even as you see the vision of tomorrow. . . Faith is the energy that makes it possible for you to maintain balance of spirit in this world of change and insecurity. Faith is the grace given to you by God, enabling you to reach out for life when confronted with death. Faith is the power of God's love that makes [us] strong when [we] are weak, gives [us] courage when [we] fear, and supports [us] when [we] falter."



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