

“A Church as Plan B: Toward the Church-to-Come”

May 28th, 2017

First Congregational Church
Los Angeles, CA

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John: 13:34-35
Matthew: 25:35-46

1.

What is Sunday for you? Why are you here on this bright Sunday morning when you could have been doing something fun, relaxing, or entertaining?

Sunday is, in a way, a rebellion against weekdays. Sunday is not, and should not be a mere continuation of other weekdays. If Sunday is a mere continuation and repetition of weekdays, thinking about the same stuff that we usually do during weekdays, what's the point of coming to church on Sunday?

To observe Sunday in a meaningful way, we should make an intentional, decisive discontinuity from weekdays and intentional detachment from our daily lives, so that we can ask root questions that we do not ask in our mundane lives, and encounter a new world, a new birth of our own being. In this sense, Sunday should be an “event of new birth,” which would mean we could experience a critical “before” and “after” the Sunday.

You withdraw yourself from the weekdays in order to encounter the root questions such as: Who am I? Why am I doing what I am doing? What is it that would make my life meaningful? Or as St. Augustine asks: What do I love when I love my God?

Many Christians often say that Jesus is the Answer. But in order to make Jesus as the one who offers answers, we must know what our questions are. Only when we have courage and intentionality to encounter these root questions, we would be able to find answers. When you do not have questions, you never get the answers. In this sense, questions are more profound than answers. Therefore, do not rush to find a ready-made answer for your life.

2.

To be is to inherit, that the being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not. Inheritance is not about receiving something and having it in our possession to use as we see fit. In this sense, inheritance is never a “given,” but it comes as a “task.”

We have inherited the world, civilization, society, traditions, religion, and so on. You have inherited one hundred-fifty years of tradition of this First Congregational Church. If the inheritance is not just a “given” but a “task,” what tasks do we have to carry out? What kind of responsibility we have to the inheritance of Christian Church? The inheritance of tradition comes as an injunction to which we must respond.

Inheriting the tradition of Church should not mean a blind acceptance of the inheritance. Inheriting the tradition of church does not mean to be a blind defender or transmitter of Christian tradition. For, the tradition of Christian church has often carried dark sides, implicitly or explicitly, bounded by religious or cultural superiority, ethnocentrism, homophobia, exclusive nationalism, sexism, racism, ableism, and so forth. If this dark side is a part of the tradition of church we inherit, what kind of responsibility we should take as an heir of the tradition of church?

3.

Again, inheriting the tradition of church is not just a given but a task. The task involves a double responsibility: First, a contestation and second, an affirmation.

We must contest what is deadly, discriminative, exclusive in the inheritance of the tradition. At the same time, we must affirm what in it gives life, which also requires innovating new traditions as well. In order to take up the double responsibility to inheritance of the tradition, it is necessary for us to read and to study the tradition in question.

The two biblical texts that we read offer us significant insights as to what it means by being Jesus' disciples, what it means by being church, and what religion should be about. Jesus' message in John 13 is like Jesus' Farewell Address. Jesus introduces a new commandment to his disciples in his Farewell Address: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:34–35).

4.

Jesus' farewell address contains an extremely significant theological insight for the question of what it means to be Jesus' disciples. Many Christians have regarded being Jesus' disciples as identical with having membership in a Christian church. However, Jesus' farewell address affirms the essential nature of being Jesus' disciples, which is practicing love, exercising an unconditional hospitality—showing compassion to the other, to the stranger, to the foreigner, to the guest.

Jesus presents the core of his teaching in the following statement in Matthew 25:40 "The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me." The name Jesus here symbolizes a substitution, which entails a being-with-and-for-the Other.

Nowadays, for a large number of Christians, church is becoming like a Salvation Club. In this "salvation club-mentality," Christians usually think that as long as they maintain their membership of a church, the salvation is guaranteed. For this kind of Christians, being a Christian is like you have a Salvation-Insurance, just in case. Churches become the places where people exercise a kind of Spiritual Capitalism, in which an "economy of exchange" operates and maximizing the "self-interest," rather than the "common good," is the only prime virtue and goal of people's religious life. However, according to these two bible texts, following Jesus, being disciples of Jesus, is far from being the member of the private salvation club.

5.

This morning, I would like to use a new term that I coined, Jesusian, rather than Christian. The term "Christian" has strong link to Christianity as an institutionalized religion, whereas "Jesugian" is to

acknowledge the discrepancy between Jesus and Christianity as an institutionalized religion and further to emphasize and focus on the very life and teachings of Jesus. So we are not only Christians but also we should be Jesusians.

What Jesus teaches from these texts are about religion in general and church in particular. According to Jesus, religion, being Jesus' disciples, and Jesusian Church should be about love, responsibility, and hospitality to the others in our individual and collective lives. In this sense, a philosopher by the name of Jacques Derrida points out, "religion is responsibility or it is nothing." In this context, evil is non-responsibility.

What Jesus also offers here in these texts is more questions than answers. Jesus is assigning us a significant task to work on by urging us to wrestle with further questions in our own contexts. Those questions can be like:

- *What constitute loving-one another today?*
- *Who are the hungry; who are the thirsty, who are the stranger, who are the naked, who are the sick, who are the imprisoned today, not only in the City of LA or within the US territory but also other parts of the world?*
- *What do I love when I love my God or my Jesus?*

6.

Here Jesus is very clear that loving one another is not a romantic act that does not want to see the dark sides, challenging and often disturbing side of love. Loving one-another is a risk taking act, and taking an action for change of the existing sociopolitical system in order to love the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.

According to the life and teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, Jesus hardly mentions about "religion" or "church" as an institutionalized entity. Jesus never shows any desire or plan to found an institutionalized structure that we call "religion" or "church." Jesus did not intend to found anything but to announce the good news to the marginalized, to the poor, to the hungry, to the sick, to the imprisoned, to the excluded, to the stranger and to share his life with them and among them, compassionately and responsibly.

We must remind ourselves that the church is the archive of Jesus and that the church is never about to have its own power and authority. The church defines and determines what Jesus stands for, and what Jesus would do here and now. The primary duty of the church is therefore to bear the memory of Jesus and ask itself the question: What we must say and do in the importantly different situation between Jesus' time and time that we live now today?

7.

There are two kinds of churches: One is the responsible and mature church, and the other one is the irresponsible and immature church.

The responsible and mature church is a church that lives in the critical tension between the church-as-it-is and the church-as-it-ought-to-be.

The church-as-it-ought-to-be always remains as the church-to-come. In this sense, the church-as-it-is always already the Plan B, never a Plan A.

The church-to-come is the church as the site of the unconditional hospitality, the site of radical responsibility to the others, not only close others but also distant others, and the site of unconditional loving-the others in our reality, where the marginalized, the excluded exist and suffer in various ways.

The church-to-come dreams a world where all singular persons in all places, countries, cultures, regions, religions, and of all genders, races, classes, sexualities, abilities enjoy the cosmic conviviality in the world that God creates and loves.

Inheriting the tradition of the church is not merely for repetition of the tradition, or justification of the doctrine and polity, but motivating people in the church and society toward the better practices of what Jesus asks us to do. People outside the church would value doctrinal confession or long-standing traditions not for the words or claims to truth and authority by the church but for the ways in which the church and Jesusians in it ever-enlarge the circle of inclusion of justice and equality for all singular persons in all places.

8.

What would happen if Jesus shows up in the First Congregational Church next Sunday when you are about to celebrate one hundred fifty years' anniversary?

Perhaps, Jesus would remind us again and again that “you love one another. . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples (John. 13:34–35); And “every time you practice radical hospitality for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me (Matt. 25:46).”

Let us Jesusians continue to dream an impossible dream for the church-to-come, where new practices of radical neighbor-love, radical inclusion, radical hospitality become actualized, which cross exclusive borders of citizenship, nationality, gender, class, sexuality, or ability, and regard all persons in all places as uniquely singular persons, each of whom has a proper name and unique face in the image of God.