

Sermon by Dr. William Huntley, Crawford Professor of Religion, University of Redlands, Redlands, CA

July 26, 2015 at Community Presbyterian Church, Redlands.

3 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

A Prayer for the Ephesians

14 For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom every family[a<<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=ephesians+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-29267a>>]in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

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20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

This passage flows directly from the reading last week that Jan preached about, which I read aloud about the image of the "wall of separation" that existed in ancient Ephesus that she updated as like an amnesia in America about our wall of separation in civil rights awareness, or the lack thereof. She asked me to comment that I had recently read that the Confederate Flag, which for some is a symbol of backwardness, even of a symbol of traitors to our Union, but actually only raised on the SC capital during 1962 during the civil rights marches.

But I am not here to repeat just affirm what Jan said and especially the remarks she shared from Pres. Obama during the memorial service in Charleston, SC. Although I might add that the white and black hands holding each other on that Charleston Bridge made me cry with joy, for I have relatives still alive all over S. C. including Charleston.

Today I am turning to a question that Evelyn asked me last Sunday, "What is up with you, Bill, what have you been doing. So I am giving a long answer to that question. I shall invoke the option of telling all of you why I was missing in May, or as what Jan might call "her day job" This is my "May job"

For 20 times I have been to Japan, and 3 years ago from this pulpit, I told what happened in May of 2012. This is somewhat of an update, but this June I spent writing about what happened in May in Japan with 15 students. We went as a class. It was not to be compared to one of Paul's missionary journeys, don't get me wrong. I was not sent on a mission to the Gentiles as the early Church in Jerusalem sent St. Paul.

I did go with the academic and financial auspices of the University of Redlands, and it was a Religious Studies course, which the aim of offering students "the chance to visit museums, Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and Christian churches" (syllabus to REL 325).

We did all those things and more. So let me share with you a journey to Japan what happened as I read from my journal, the journals of students as

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to what they experienced in May 2015. We landed from various air lines of our own choice. I found my trip would take me to Tokyo, then Osaka near Kyoto, where we would spend 12 nights in the same hotel just beside the Imperial Palace. My plan was to visit the religious organizations or religious buildings in the order in which they found their way to Japan.

Shinto religions were the first to be seen for they have had buildings in Japan, especially in Kyoto from the founding of the city in the 9th Century or 1,200 years ago. We had only one block to walk from our hotel where we had a classroom in the small library about the size of the room in which the children's experience is now taking place, image 18 of us crammed in there, But since I had one married couple in the group, I had them participate in what many Japanese do in an ancient wedding ceremony. The Shinto ceremony calls for the bride and groom to share a sacred sake with each other. (That morning I used a cup of water, I can confess) and had the couple drink from the same cup)

Then we walked down the street to the Sugawarain Temmangu Shrine. The Shrine was about the same size as our church property which has been on this corner now for a century. The Shrine has been there for a thousand years. Each shrine in Japan has a design put on an ema. A Shinto shrine is called a "jinga" by the way. (no test on these terms, just relax with me on our month long journey in the next 20 minutes) This is an ema with an image of Michizane Sugawara, or in the Japanese order Sugawara (last name first) Michizane. These little ema -, or blocks of wood, and be bought just inside the first wall, and visitors write a prayer for a safe trip, or thanks for taking an exam, or hopes for passing an exam, on the back and usually leave the-on a wall inside the shrine. I always take mine home with me and have each person with me (i.e. student) write her or his name on the back. This year I interpreted the ema as a prayer for the safe passage of all with me on the trip to be safe in Japan and the across the Pacific as they went home. My prayers were answered for all got back safely. Inside the shrine, some of my students learned to ring a sound from a bell or clapper for the Kami (gods in Japanese) to observe her or his presence while offering a silent prayer in some ways the same as Matthew just led us in a silent prayer. Sometimes a monetary offering was given by individuals, perhaps less generous than we will give at the end of this service, or sometimes

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more generous, for one can offer a huge jug or carton the size of the baskets that Ev and Larry bring full of greatfruits. The Japanese sake has a little more weight in that size box or carton. That was more or less one day, although we did visit another shrine which celebrate the founder's safe journey back to Kyoto with the guidance of a wild boar. Do you remember any safe delivery of Jewish or Christian travelers back from a sojourn abroad? How about David getting back to his little citadel after battles with the Philistines, or St. Paul being protected as he returned from the first 2 missionary journeys?

I am not suggesting I was on a "missionary journey" in May in Japan. My brother Betts, his wife and children know better than I what a missionary journey feels like. Perhaps think of me as making investigations of what and how Japanese people worship in this little piece of the 21st century. So let's pause after day one and answer the question as to what is the purpose of a Shinto Shrine or at least the ones we visited in May. It seems to be a friendly, open religion scattered through every part of Japan, with a shrine at least the size of our church here in almost every block on nearly every street in Japan ...one can usually find a place to take water to drink or to cleanse one's mouth, hands, and perhaps thoughts. The object of worship varies from a face of person, an ancestor or hero, a mountain, a tree, a rock, an animal especially the cycle of 12 to mark the year, the hour like a boar, a tiger, a bird. It may have been built to remember or to celebrate an era like the Heian era (when Kyoto became the capital of Japan for in the 800's or the Meiji era which began in 1868) with images of the era. Sometimes it might be considered "nationalistic" as in the place where the warriors of bygone wars, even those of WWII are remembered, but in that regard somewhat like the Arlington Memorial Cemetery where JFK is remembered. But sometimes a Shinto shrine is a place where an ordinary person accomplished something for his/her neighborhood as in the case of Michizane Sugawara, or in Redlands we have a shrine for the memory of Abraham Lincoln on the same piece of real estate as the Smiley Library with statues of two ordinary if rich brothers, who look down with appreciation at me if I remember to return the books on time or delivery bags full as gifts for the future. Sometimes in some shrines I think of the many people a thousand, or in the case of Shintoism 2,000 years ago

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period when the early people, before there was a written language, similar to Native Americans bringing a gift in thanks for a good harvest, a gift of rice in Japan like a gift of corn in what is now New Mexico. Theirs in both cases is a testimony of thanks to a higher power and an indwelling of thankfulness in the ones who bring the offerings. That, dear friends, is the origin of what we call now "religions"

On day two of our journey we visited two Buddhist temples. Each of these were buildings owned by one of the emperors or a shogun who near death gave his home to a sect of Buddhism to become a temple. Japanese Buddhist call their sanctuaries "otera" or "ji"

The first was called Kinkaku-ji (or Gold pavilion temple) which had been built in the 14th Century or the time of Chaucer in England. The ruler was name Yoshimitsu Ashiga who was the Shogun before he died giving his house to the Zen Buddhists. We did not get inside the building. It was mob scene that day in a so called "Golden Week" (not named for the temple, by the way) with students from all over Japan, even some from China, who were especially when they realized I had two students from China amid my group of 15 students, who went with me to Japan on their way home to China for summer vacation.

On that same day, #2, we walked down a hill about half a mile and each of us picked a place for lunch. I happen to be followed closely by the two Chinese students into a small restaurant that was formerly , or perhaps still a house as well. We sat on the floor, and I tried not to kick the Chinese, who were more skillful than I was. This time we went to the Ryoan-ji, which was a villa, about twice the size of the Gold Pavilion Temple. It was given tot eh Zen Buddhism by Hosokawa Masamoto, and is my favorite building in all of Japan. I went there 29 years earlier, and sat for at least 30 minutes, mainly I remember giving thanks for the time to sit still without answering any questions and trying to feel what it must have been like as a Buddhist pilgrim allowed to enter the very building, walk without shoes on the clean, polished wooden floor and then sit and look at a rectangle about 30 feet by 50 feet of raked sand with 15 small or large stones. No sound except the heavy breathing of someone near me, or someone sitting down or getting up from the steps on which we sat in 4 or 5 rows.

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Since the chance to sit for 30 minutes was the single most written about event in the month of May for my students in their journals, let me describe what we did. Here is a zafu

This one happens to be black, the most common color, but we have a Technicolor one for about 40 years that rarely gets sat on. Each of you might have been told last week to bring one, but perhaps you would not have showed up today. So just imagine for the next, shall we say 5 minutes, you will get to do a zazen as you pretend to be in Japan with me. I might add here that my day job next month will involve sitting with 20-28 students on just such a zafu on Thursday afternoons, for a credit class for about 30-40 minutes. What do we do on campus, or in Japan. We sit, we do not talk. We try not to move or fall asleep. Some can do as the Japanese can do, by sitting in a double lotus position. I never mastered that, so I just cross one leg over the other and try not to let either "fall asleep" or have the blood cut off. We also try not to think. That is hard. The priest who instructed us in Kyoto this year was Japanese with a PH.D in Religious Studies from Arizona State, told us 1. Try to keep a steady posture.

2. Focus on breathing, perhaps counting the number of exhalations, thinking nothing but the counting. 3. Try to keep the idea of "no mind" which was the hard part, for the brain tries to keep working, bringing up old memories, or new things that one just learned the hour, day or minute before, or thoughts of where one might eat, or a film to see...so one just lets the flash flow through the brain, taking NO actions, then letting the flash go with the next thought.

By the way in Japan, most Catholic priests I am told, especially the ones our daughter Heather had in Japan at Sophia University, a Jesuit university, where she learned to sit zazen with Zen Buddhist priest name Nishimima. For a moment, let's review. I went to Japan to show students from the USA (and this time 2 students from China) what we could discover about religious expression there. In the Buddhist temples in Kyoto the biggest discovery is that we could stop walking for an hour, sit on a cushion and listen to a Buddhist priest tell us to sit still, with our spines straight, our tongues resting, our minds relaxed like a swinging door letting thoughts flow out as we counted the number of times we exhaled our breath. How is

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that religious, some students may have pondered, and did we have to travel so far to do so? Perhaps, my answer would be that indeed we could have stayed in Redlands and meditated in Larsen Hall, but somehow to travel all the way to Japan and find it done there in a temple guided by a Japanese priest with a twitter account was impressive and memorable. As far as I can determine, none had done zazen before and some may never do so again, but for a few minutes they then and you now can sense what it was that the Buddha taught 25 centuries ago in what is now India.

Then we went to a church, the first Sunday in Japan. There is an Anglican church, Episcopalians in USA, called St Agnes in the very next block to our hotel. In fact we learned that the Christians who own the land our hotel was built on, still own the land. The church was made of red brick of the same design a thousand churches in UK are still using. There were just about as many seats as we have here in Community Presbyterian. We arrived early, so I was shocked when the priests asked us to come forward and sit in the "choir" which in the Anglican tradition is a row of seats which face each other at the very front. To be asked to sit in the choir was an indication to me that there was NO group of people who normally sit there to sing. But I knew my class could not sign hymns or psalms, for we had never tried. By the way the 15 of us were just about the same number as the rest of the congregation that day. So that made me feel very much at home, with the size as the fact it was a church and not a temple or shrine that day.

The lexionary for that day took us to a chapter in Acts where a eunuch from Africa was returning home after a trip to Jerusalem where he acquired a scroll from the writings of the prophet Isaiah that was about the coming Messiah. Meanwhile the Apostle Phillip is running along beside the chariot of the Eunuch and was asked to help interpret the Isaiah scroll. Phillip tells the African that the Messiah has come and his name is Jesus.

Perhaps no student had ever heard the story from Acts about the Apostle Phillip, and for the two Chinese students it was the first time they were actually in a Christian church, I learned.

So did we have to go all the way to Japan to hear this story, for had we gone to the Trinity Episcopal Church in Redlands, we would have heard the very same story, maybe you even heard it here at Community. But there was a difference, a power if you understand what I mean by going half way

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around the planet, at least 1/3 and 8 time zones of difference to hear, a priest from California read the story in English after a week of hearing mostly Japanese, about a homesick African going home with his omiage and not knowing the meaning until Phillip runs up beside the chariot and reveals the meaning. That I found not only something about the spread of religions around the world, but the importance of listening to a story, for in a fresh way that story from the early church in another quite distant place in Christendom, became MY story, either to look for who might suddenly appear with some act of kindness to me and explain something I did not understand, or also that I had a role to try to explain mysterious questions to students who had paid my way "to run along" beside "their chariots" The class did not end at the St. Agnes Episcopal Church, and indeed there was a reception with a fantastic coffee hour, where each student got to ask (in fact, was required) to ask one member of the little church a question and record for her/his journal what the answer was.

It was a powerful hour, the journals attested, when not only did the students get a response in clear English, but they got "warm" and "friendly" answers by travelers in Japan who had lived there longer than a week who shared stories of their lives in Japan. Several of the church members were American men married to Japanese women with interesting stories. One pair was the opposite with the husband being a Japanese man, with the best camera in the room, and his American wife. So we could feel the bonding across a racial pattern, but freer I think than the Black/white racial struggle that Jan talked about here last week. Perhaps the author of Ephesians would applaud this insight from that little church in its membership, for indeed the pastor who was from California met and married a Japanese woman who had studied English in Georgia, and still spoken with her Georgian vowels.

The next week we left for Tokyo, where most of the time and energy was given to our presentations in Reitaku University classrooms and in two kindergartens and two elementary schools, while the students were earning credit for community service at the U. of R. But we went to one more Christian Church, this time it was St. Nikolai Cathedral, which was founded by a Russian Orthodox priest name Nikolai in the late 1800's when the

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Japanese Islands were opened for missionaries from elsewhere to come, to preach, to baptize, to share the communion.

In 1987 our family went there for an Easter service for what was a service in Russian with chants in Russian, from the mouths of Japanese people, and incense so thick we could have been in Salzburg. But why go there you may ask, when we did not know what was being said or sung?

We went because I wanted the students to appreciate that somehow Christians could meet each other on the far side of this planet. Christianity spread Northward to Russia and then Eastward across Siberia to Japan, while it also spread Westward to Europe, to England and to America, (as Dick Gatchel once told us in a sermon he gave at Impact) and when we got to Japan, we could witness the two branches in Tokyo on a Sunday morning. In the Nikolai Cathedral we could see the IKONS so important to Orthodox Christians as they are to Roman Catholics as well. We could hear the chants with a Russian like sound with the deep bass vibrations even if sung by Japanese. We might guess was happening as people went forward for what would be their form of the sacrament of holy communion, which none of us took. But we could imagine the long struggle for Christianity to be established in this special place in Tokyo and we could vibrate with the bells that rung to conclude the service, as if we were somewhere else in Christendom, such as Moscow, or Rome, or Salzburg and be inspired by the sounds. Thus perhaps you could feel as I did that morning in Tokyo, that there is a power in the Christian message that the author of Ephesians (be he St. Paul, or Paul's "best student" and editor) felt as well in the early 2nd Century as I did in the 21st Century.