Class Notes #8: Ordinary Times

**Discipleship/Church**

Required Readings: Class Notes #8; Buttrick, Conclusion; Moltmann, Ch. III/4-7 (pp. 94-135); Hickman, et al., Chs. 7-8.

Suggested Readings: Bonhoeffer.

Introduction to the Season of Ordinary Time

The ordinary cycle of the year includes the seasons after Epiphany and after Pentecost. Since these times are not related to particular Christological events in the calendar, the RCL selects biblical texts not in the *lectio selecta* but in the *lectio continua*. That is, for the Sundays of the ordinary times, the RCL offers semi-continuous readings of the OT and NT texts, rather than using a thematic unity. The RCL reads the Patriarchal and Mosaic narratives in the Pentateuch along with Matthew in Year A, the Davidic narratives in the historical books along with Mark in Year B, and the Elijah-Elisha sequence from the historical books and selections from the entire prophetic canon along with Luke in Year C. During the end of the post-Pentecost Sundays, the Wisdom literature is introduced. In addition, apocalyptic texts are read during the Sundays preceding Advent and the First and Second Sundays of Advent to proclaim the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The Gospel texts for Sundays during the ordinary cycle of the year are about the ministry and teaching of Jesus and lead us to reflect on discipleship and the identity of the church. The liturgical color of the ordinary time is green.

If the preacher wants to preach on particular topics outside the lectionary, the ordinary cycle of the year can be used for that.

The Doctrine of Discipleship/Church

The lectionary lessons during the ordinary time focus on exploring the nature of the Messiah we encounter and follow, the life-style of the baptized as disciples of Christ, and the unity of the church in mission. The Messiah is, not a private property of religious people, but disturbingly universal in his promises and demands. The messianic visitation comes right in the midst of where people carry on their daily life and work. The Messiah is the one who advocates the poor and the dispossessed who desperately need justice, and he calls us to live a new life following his footsteps, turning round against the dominant value patterns of society.

According to Molmann, Jesus’ eschatological life began with his baptism by John the Baptist. While John the Baptist emphasized “the forgiveness of sins for conversion” with baptism, Jesus experienced through his baptism the Spirit resting on him and saw a vision of “the open heavens (Mk 1:10).” The continuing presence of the Spirit in Jesus is the true beginning of the kingdom of God, and of the new creation in history. He proclaimed the imminent, loving kingdom of God and demonstrated its nearness, not through threats and asceticism, but through the signs of grace to distraught men and women. His ministry including healing the sick, exorcising demons, and forgiving sinners signifies “the liberating fullness of time” of the Messiah (Gal 4:4)” (90-91).

Jesus’ messianic ministry in relation to the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, and outcasts, as well as the rich, needs interpretation, in order to give meaning to the contemporary listeners. In other words, how can the gospel of the kingdom of God be the good news for them? Moltmann helps us reflect on this question as follows:

1) Salvation for the poor: When Jesus says that ”Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3),” he convinces that God has made them the heirs of the coming kingdom. That does not mean that the poor and the powerless are offered some utopia or other world to be consoled for the lives they live in the present. Instead, it is the present tense, i.e., this promise is already theirs. The poor who belong to the kingdom of God no longer accept the values of the rich that have produced self-hatred and self-destruction in their minds, but live with “their hands held high” and “walk erect” with dignity (101). Accordingly, the restoration of self-identity and life of the children of God is the salvation for the poor.

Nevertheless, we often hear the preaching of “wish-fulfillment” that emphasizes materialistic blessing in this world as the only blessing of God. This prosperity gospel misleads the listeners to follow the values of the rich in this world and distorts the Christian faith as a supernatural, magical tool of “wish-fulfillment.” Furthermore, this kind of preaching gives impression that the Christian gospel itself is success-oriented, and Christianity is the “religion for winners.”

2) Salvation for the sick and demon-possessed: When the Gospels reported Jesus’ ministry of the expulsion of demons and the healing of the sick, they do not merely portrait Jesus as a miracle worker who possessed extraordinary powers. Rather, Jesus’ ministry is eschatological. The healings are signs of God’s power of resurrection or the signs of Christ’s glory, while every sickness is a threat to life, a foreshadowing of death. Therefore, his miraculous power is identical with the lordship of God.

Accordingly, Jesus’ ministry of healing and exorcism is the “foretoken” of the reality of the kingdom of God, the consummation of “the all-comprehensive salvation.” Salvation is not merely the salvation of the soul for the individual, nor “spiritual benefits,” but includes the “wholeness and well-being of human beings” (John 7:23). When the sick are demonized—for example, people with AIDS in our context—they are shut out of society and condemned to social death. In this situation, it is impossible to heal the sick without healing their relationships with others by changing the existing social system and the corporate mentality of the community. Salvation cannot be fulfilled merely in the personal dimension but includes communal and cosmic dimensions, too (110).

Preaching based on the healing stories in the Bible often stresses that such miracles in the Bible can literally become “our miracles” by faith. However, this kind of preaching is detached from the eschatological context of the text and ignores the multi-dimensional meaning of Christian salvation.

3) Salvation for the Outcasts: In the Gospels, Jesus was often blamed by the Pharisees and priests to be “the friend of sinners,” because he accepted sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes into his circle of friends and ate with them. His friendship with them, however, does not mean that Jesus justified their sins, but that he broke through the vicious circle of their discrimination in the system of values set up by the so-called righteous. By turning to those outcasts, Jesus revealed the messianic righteousness of God which made the unjust just, the bad good, and the ugly beautiful, through the justice of grace; Jesus’ eating with the sinners demonstrated bringing, not only the lordship of God over the whole world, but also the great and joyful banquet of the nations (115).

The eschatological grace of the kingdom of God which was represented in Jesus’ friendship with the outcasts is hard to be found in moralistic preaching that focuses on personal piety and legalistic moral behavior. The deeper level of the eschatological meaning of Christian salvation goes beyond the “black and white” individualistic and moralistic approach, and challenges preachers to imagine the eschatological vision of salvation.

4) Salvation for the rich: Jesus’ ministry includes the rich, as well as the poor, the sick, and outcasts. His eschatological teaching meets the rich with the call to conversion (Mk 1:15). Conversion means turning round, the turn from violence to justice, from isolation to community, from selfishness to altruism, and from death to life. As Moltmann describes, conversion is itself an anticipation of and struggle for the kingdom of God, the new heaven and new earth, under the unjust conditions of this world. The call to conversion, therefore, leads the rich into the discipleship of Jesus. They are called to reject the life of dominance and violence and live the life of service and love for the need (Mk 10:42-5). Call to the discipleship is, therefore, the invitation to the eschatological community of faith in which the members “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).” In this sense, the discipleship of Christ and brotherly and sisterly life in the community of Christ go together.

The path of discipleship is to follow Jesus’ suffering with the invisible hope for the resurrection from the dead. The disciples will perceive who Jesus is, not merely by knowledge or by other’s witness, but by following him to the place where they should take up their own cross (Mk. 8:27-31). Thus, the discipleship is not possessed, but is in the process, open and incomplete (139). It is as serious as demanding the total loss of self, the whole self-emptying, the loss of strength and dignity, the loss of human relationships, and even the loss of life, as Jesus went through on the cross. When there is no longer any sustaining tradition or human community, nothing but the God Jesus trusts, we come true disciples of God. This theological concept of discipleship is well described in Endo’s novel, *Silence,* which is now available in film.

Discipleship is not private, but communal. God calls the community of faith to the discipleship of Christ. As Pamela McCarroll rightly points out, “Suffering” is a traditional mark of the church, because it is a consequence of discipleship. She explains that the suffering of the church is a sign of its love, solidarity, and commitment to God’s beloved world and its creatures (*Waiting at the Foot of the Cross*, 178). By being **in** the world, but **not of** the world, the church in its suffering represents the pain of God to the world and the pain of the world to God (178). Therefore, the church has a representational role in the world in its participation in the ministry of Jesus Christ (181). Its mission is, not to expand the power and dominance of denominational churches, but to confess hope in action in the midst of present suffering. The church will become a diaspora reality wherein it may embody in action its hope for the world (182).

In *The Cost of Discipleship,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that “cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (47). In this sense, “believing in Jesus” means an action, discipleship.

In our capitalistic and materialistic society, one of the difficult texts to preach in relation to discipleship is Luke 12:33-34: “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Many preachers spiritualize the text by identifying the term “possession” as pride or desire, and stress that we should “sell” our prides and desires, rather than our material possessions. The discipleship of Christ, however, challenges us to think about what true discipleship means and to bring him into the concrete day-to-day “flesh” without spiritualizing him. To draw him into flesh means to bring him down out of the abstract, the remote, the merely pondered, into the reality that is ours to live.