Class Notes #8: Ordinary Time

**Discipleship/Church**

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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 times after Epiphany and after Pentecost. Since these times are not related to particular Christological events in the calendar, the RCL selects biblical texts not from the *lectio selecta,* but from the *lectio continua*. More precisely, for the Sundays of Ordinary Time, the RCL offers semi-continuous readings of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament texts, rather than delivering 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 in the historical books and selections from the entire prophetic canon, along with Luke, in Year C. At 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 the 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 traditional liturgical color of Ordinary Time is green.

If the preacher wants to preach a sermon series on particular topics or expository sermons focusing on a specific book in the Bible outside the lectionary, the ordinary cycle of the year may be the time for doing this.

The Doctrine of Discipleship/Church

The lectionary lessons during Ordinary Time focus on exploring the life and ministry of Jesus, the identity and role of the baptized, and the mission of the community of faith. Jesus as the Messiah is not the private property of Christians, but is disturbingly universal in his promise and demand. The messianic visitation comes right in the midst of where we carry on our daily life and work. The Messiah is the one who advocates for the poor and the dispossessed, desperately in need of justice, and who calls us to live new lives following in his footsteps, and turning on the dominant value patterns of the privileged in society.

According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ eschatological life begins with his baptism by John the Baptist. While the Baptist emphasizes “the forgiveness of sins for conversion,” through baptism Jesus experiences the Spirit resting on him and sees 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. Jesus proclaims the imminent, loving kingdom of God and demonstrates its nearness, not through threats and asceticism, but through signs of grace to distraught men and women. Moltmann expresses Jesus’ ministry, including healing the sick, exorcising demons, and forgiving sinners, as “the liberating fullness of time” of the Messiah (Gal. 4:4)” (90-91).

Jesus’ messianic ministry to the poor, the sick, the demon-possessed, and the outcasts, as well as to the rich, requires interpretation that it might have meaning for contemporary listeners. In other words, how can the gospel of the kingdom of God be good news for them? Moltmann helps us reflect on this question for homiletical insights:

1) Salvation for the poor: When Jesus says “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:3), he convinces us that God has made such people heirs of the coming kingdom. That does not mean that the poor and the powerless are offered some utopia or other world as consolation for the lives they live in the present. Instead, it is in 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 the self-identity and life of the children of God is salvation for the poor.

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

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

Moltmann describes Jesus’ eschatological ministry of healing and exorcism as the “foretoken” of the reality of the kingdom of God, the consummation of an “all-comprehensive salvation” (110). Here salvation is not limited to the personal dimension, but includes the “wholeness and well-being of human beings,” that is, communal and cosmic dimensions (110). When the sick are demonized in our context, people with AIDS for example, they are shut out of society and are 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 (110).

It is a major challenge for preachers in our context to preach from the healing stories in the Bible. Some preachers stress that such miracles in the Bible can literally become “our miracles” by faith, while others spiritualize them. Both kinds of preaching detach the miracle stories from their eschatological context and ignore the multi-dimensional meaning of Christian salvation.

3) Salvation for the Outcasts: In the Gospels, Jesus is often blamed by the Pharisees and priests for being “the friend of sinners,” because he accepts sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes into his circle of friends and eats with them. His friendship with them does not mean that Jesus justifies their sins. Instead, he breaks the vicious cycle of their discrimination in the system of values set up by the so-called righteous. By turning to those outcasts, Jesus reveals the messianic righteousness of God, i.e., the justice of grace that makes the unjust just, the bad good, and the ugly beautiful. Jesus’ eating with the sinners, for example, demonstrates the lordship of God over the whole world, as well as offering a foretaste of the great and joyful banquet of the nations (115).

The eschatological grace of the kingdom of God that is presented in Jesus’ friendship with outcasts is rarely heard in the sort of moralistic preaching that prescribes personal perfection as a means of salvation. Only visionary preachers who are able to imagine the eschatological vision of salvation can preach the deeper eschatological meaning of Christian salvation.

4) Salvation for the rich: Jesus’ ministry includes the rich, as well as the poor, the sick, and the outcasts. His eschatological teaching for the rich is a call to conversion (Mk 1:15). Conversion means turning around, from violence to justice, from isolation to community, from selfishness to altruism, and from death to life. As Moltmann emphasizes, conversion itself is an anticipation of and a struggle for the kingdom of God, the new heaven and the 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 a life of dominance and violence and to live one of service and love for the needy (Mk. 10:42-5).

Call to discipleship, therefore, is an invitation to the eschatological community of faith, in which members “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).” At this point, the discipleship of Christ and a brotherly and sisterly life in the community of Christ go together.

Moltmann reminds us that the path of discipleship is to follow Jesus’ suffering with invisible hope for the resurrection from the dead. The disciples will perceive who Jesus is, not merely by knowledge or by the witness of others, but by following him to the place where they might take up their own cross (Mk. 8:27-31). Thus, discipleship is not possessed, but is a process, open and incomplete (139). As Dietrich Bonhoeffer elaborates in *The Cost of Discipleship*, discipleship is costly; it demands total loss—loss of self, loss of strength and dignity, loss of relationships, and even loss of life—as Jesus experienced on the cross. When there is no longer any sustaining tradition or human community, nothing but the God Jesus trusts, we become true disciples of God. Therefore, “believing in Jesus” means discipleship and costly grace, while “cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (47). This theological concept of discipleship is also 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). The church therefore 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 the denominational churches, but to confess hope in action in the midst of present suffering. The church will then become a diaspora reality, embodying in action its hope for the world (182).

In our capitalist and materialistic society, one of the more 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 this text by interpreting the term “possessions” as pride or desires, and stress that we should “sell” our pride and desires, rather than our material possessions. The discipleship of Christ, however, challenges us to think about what true discipleship means and how to live it out in our concrete life-situations. It demands us to draw the Christ into flesh, that is, to bring him down out of the abstract, the remote, the merely pondered, into the reality that is ours to live.