

The Bencke Family in Japan



July 2020- 83 番



Pentecost flowers

These were the altar flowers this past Sunday – fire lilies. I love how the tongues of fire seem to explode out of the “lily” at the base of the arrangement. As I gazed upon the arrangement while waiting for the service to start, I wondered, are the words I speak truly sourced from Jesus? Does my behavior and actions represent a holy spirit and a holy intention? Who would I be if I could somehow allow the Holy Spirit to “do whatever it wants with me?”

Enough

Pentecost is one of those church holidays that, as a child, I never understood what all the fuss was about. Even now, I find it hard to describe why we call Pentecost a celebration of the birthday of the church. I suppose birthdays and celebrations are kind of on equal planes.

For us, Pentecost was our first Sunday back in the pews of Murozono Church after a period of worshipping at home. Everyone, of course, donned their masks, sat a good distance apart, and kept conversational contact to a minimum. There was no communion. There was no power point. There was only one instrument accompanying all of the hymns. No readers besides the pastor. Our pastor preached from the pulpit with a mask on. Hand sanitizer was put out at every entry point within the church building. Conversations after church were held at an unnatural distance. It was a little surreal to take it all in.

But here’s the thing. As soon as we started singing our opening hymn, “Spirit of God, descend upon my heard,” an unearthly joy just overcame my weary heart. It was *enough* to just be together, to worship God with our voices joined as one choir, and to not have anything else to do or think about.

That was last week, just as the news was hitting Japan about the demonstrations happening across the United States. It is incredibly difficult to respond to people here who ask about it. I don’t even know where to begin.

Does racism exist in Japan? For sure!!!! I was “profiled” once, harassed, detained, along the side of a road. It was about two months after Hannah

Some of the prayers of our hearts...

Come to our side, Lord, as your people seek justice, mercy, and to be heard. Be at our sides for the difficult conversations. Be present at the table while the kids ask tough questions. Be manifest in our words and deeds as we fulfill our work obligations.

Thank you, Lord, for reminding us that you are enough. You are the sustainer of our hearts. Continue to guide us through this valley and be our strength and courage during the steep upward climb into your grace.

For peace, Lord, we pray. As our family enters a new chapter of life, give our hearts balm as we traverse through the myriad of emotions in these coming weeks. May Emilie’s farewells to her life in Japan be meaningful, and may her grief be matched with the joy and excitement of new opportunities.

was born. I had just gotten off the bus with two armloads of groceries and an infant in tow. It was dusk and I just wanted to get home. A police car flashed its lights, pulled over, got out of the car and approached me. The two police officers claimed that “there had been an increase in illegal residents” and they wanted to see if I had my “alien registration card” on me (I did). They questioned me for about 10 minutes. I was targeted because I did not look East Asian.

The police in Kumamoto are notorious for suddenly pulling over non-East-Asians and asking them to show proof of legal residence anywhere and anytime. Racism and discrimination are absolutely rampant in Japan, but it materializes a bit differently than it does in the U.S., and while I find the discrimination annoying and even frustrating, it is nothing like what Black Americans and other non-white ethnicities in America experience. The discrimination here doesn't feel vitriolic. But it does make a guest of this society feel on guard all the time.

A couple of other examples, for a white, non-Japanese person to get a driver's license, usually it takes 2 or 3 behind the wheel tests before they pass. For ethnically Korean or Chinese people in Japan? 8 to 10. Housing discrimination for Koreans and Chinese is also par for the course and the legal system tends to turn a blind eye to such complaints. Social networking, blogs, and other internet avenues are rife with the vitriol of hate speech. Even people who are considered “insufficiently Japanese” – those with one Japanese parent and another parent of another race are targeted. Chinese and Koreans are considered by Japanese to be a separate race.

As someone desperately in need of grace, I am a strong believer in Jesus, but a very imperfect follower. The weary hearts of the oppressed tug at me, like the woman who tugged at Jesus' robe. But there are times when I just come up empty. I don't know what to do, what to say, or sometimes even how to feel. That uncertainty challenges my faith in uncomfortable ways. But as a wise woman once said to me, “If the mountains were smooth, you wouldn't be able to climb them.” Part of what it means to be a Christian is to take up the uncomfortable, prickly, heavy cross, and carry it. Another part of being a follower of Christ is to come alongside those who are carrying that cross already, and help carry that burden, together, toward the mutual destination of resurrected life.

ANNOUNCEMENT:

Bencke summer 2020 home assignment

In April, due to the COVID-19 crisis, all travel for Chicago-based ELCA employees and global mission personnel was suspended. In addition, all global mission home assignments scheduled for the summer of 2020 have been cancelled. That includes our family. So, for those congregations who had requested a visit to your congregation this summer, unfortunately, we have had to cancel any plans or proposals that had been in the works. While there is not a plan in place yet for how home assignment might look in the future, know that we continue to keep you in our prayers, and are always grateful for the strong relationships we have with you. Please continue to let us know how we can pray for you.

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If you are interested in learning more about the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's global mission and/or opportunities to serve, please visit: www.elca.org/globalmission