

Fourth Weekend of Easter (RCL/B): "A Japanese Good Shepherd"  
1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18  
April 24-25, 2021  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Some of you have known and loved Kim Scharg, one of our church friends who died and entered the Church Triumphant several years ago. Kim had wonderful artwork in her home, including a sweet little painting of Mother & Child. It caught my attention because the artist painted Mary & Jesus with Japanese facial features. They're wearing traditional Japanese dress and are in a very Japanese-looking home. It's fascinating, even charming. Some folks might say, "Well, **that's** not very realistic!" But neither is artwork that shows Mother & Child as blonde-haired and blue-eyed! I think every culture around the globe has depicted our Lord (and His mother) in its own image. It's an artistic way of saying, "This is **our** Savior! He came to save **us**! He loves **us**!" In that sense, just like God made us in **God's** image (as we read in Genesis), we make God in **our** image. We believe our God became **human**, took on **flesh**, assumed a **body** in Jesus, so depicting the Person that God became is only natural.... (The Son of God's **humanity** prevents us from having prohibitions against literally **picturing** God, like our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters.)

We have a painting of the Good Shepherd in Fellowship Hall, artwork in which He's definitely depicted as white. What if He looked **Japanese** instead?? My Dad fought in World War II and wouldn't even buy a Japanese car, so that might have been a bit of a hurdle for him to clear... But the reason I'm bringing this up is that this past Friday, April 23, is the day on the church calendar when we remember Toyohiko Kagawa, a Japanese man remembered and honored as a "renewer of society," a Christian who laid down his life,

figuratively, and risked it, literally, for his fellow human beings, following St. John's charge in today's epistle:

*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

1 John 3:18

A little background: Toyohiko Kagawa was born in Kobe, Japan, in 1888. He was the son of a (married) Japanese cabinet minister and a Geisha girl. Unfortunately he was orphaned at the age of 4 and then raised by his father's wife, for whom he was apparently an unhappy reminder of her deceased husband's infidelity. Not a good situation.... It was so bad he ended up moving in with an uncle. He enrolled in Bible classes to learn English, and became a Christian at age 15. His extended family then disowned him. With the support of missionaries, Toyohiko studied at the Presbyterian College. He was married at age 22 to an apparently very understanding woman named Haru.

To show you the "starch" in this man's constitution, he was married to Haru in 1910, after which he and his new bride moved to the slums of Kobe, Japan, and lived for 12 years in a 6 by 6 foot hut, while he ministered to the poor people who lived there. (I definitely think we should be remembering Haru, Toyohiko's wife, as well as him.) He was a passionate, effective, organizer, and wouldn't have accepted the belief held by some that politics and religion should be kept separate. His faith compelled him to advocate for workers' rights. In 1912 he organized Japan's first labor union for shipyard workers. Later on (1918) he worked to organize farmers as well. He took a couple years off to come to New Jersey and study "social techniques to relieve poverty and misery"<sup>1</sup> at Princeton University (1914-1916). He returned to Japan in 1916 and paid the price for his labor activism. He was arrested and jailed both in 1919 and 1921 for his involvement with labor unions. In his "spare time" he founded schools, hospitals, credit unions and churches....

Toyohiko worked for universal voting rights for **men** in Japan (succeeding in 1925) and then moved on to **women's** suffrage. In 1928 he must have had some kind of premonition about WW II, because that's when he organized the National Anti-War League in Japan. 12 years later, in 1940, Japan attacked China. Toyohiko then **apologized** for Japan's aggression, resulting in his detention once again. Not one to quit, he traveled to the U.S. in 1941 to try to avoid war. Having done what he could do, he returned to Japan in September of 1941; Pearl Harbor was attacked in December of that same year, despite his efforts.

Toyohiko Kagawa was a man after St. John's own heart, for his 150 books echoed the message in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> letters of St. John, about love as the crux of the Christian faith. As we listen to his words, let's remember that only an infinitesimal number of Japanese were Christian, then, and are still. Non-Christians were his primary reading audience:

Only in the Temple of Love do I worship God. In groups of working men, at the dimpled cheeks of babies, in the embrace of the loved one, I worship God. Love alone introduces God to me. Love is my sanctuary – in factory, field, city street; in bedroom, office kitchen, sickroom. I have my sanctuary wherever I go in the universe. Where Love is, there God is. No sects there are in Love. Buddhist, Mohammedan, Christian – these are not Love's divisions. Love knows how to embrace, but not differentiate. Jesus never said that men were to be shunned for their creeds. Love is the ultimate revelation.<sup>1</sup>

In our Gospel the Lord Jesus says, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* (John 10:11) There is only one "**great** shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20), but there are many members of the flock, called to follow the lead of the Good Shepherd, laying down their lives for each other, in love. The laying down of life is rarely the ultimate sacrifice of life itself, but often the gifts of time, talent, treasure: the material goods, worldly wealth, that we hear of in our epistle from 1 John:

*How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 John 3:17-18)*

Or in another translation, *"Little children, do not make love a matter of talking and of the tongue, but love in deed and in truth."*<sup>2</sup>

"Loving in deed and in truth" looked one way to Jesus, 2,000 years ago, and another to Toyohiko Kagawa, in Kobe, 100 years ago, and yet another to us, today. May the Good Shepherd lead us not only to green pastures, still waters, laden tables, but also to the paths of righteousness where we are called to pour out our lives, our love, our worldly wealth, our financial means, to our brothers and sisters in need. The more passionately and sacrificially we love, the more closely we are made in God's image. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Gail Ramshaw, *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude* (Daily Study Bible, rev. ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 82.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham