

A Meditation on the Hybridity of Christian Churches
A Reflection for August 28th, 2022
Rev. Dr. Alan Lai

+ Peace be with you!

We have the gospel text this morning to challenge us in many fronts. The setting is a Shabbat dinner, a Friday evening meal after Jewish worship. The text doesn't say whether Jesus and the Pharisees worshiped together prior, or they just met after worship. This is an interesting setting for our conversation. What do you do after worship, especially after you express your love and service to the Creator? Or is it just a formality and a habit of doing something regularly? This can be a conversation for the next hour!

For the past three years, whenever the text dictates, I have mentioned to you that a text like this isn't a text for us to think negatively about the Pharisees, ancient or contemporary Jewish leaders, and Judaism. Look closely, the text says "some pharisees." Judaism is a beautiful religion that requires its members to constantly examine the integrity of faith and practice; Christianity and other world religions need to do the same. This story is to challenge our tendency to seek places of honour.

Hear the text: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Good stuff! Who has done that? Almost nobody! I apologize if you have done that. I certainly haven't. This is what Jesus' teachings aim at doing, that is to challenge us to think of our take for granted patterns, to turn it upside down so we can see the absurdity of our lives, even we say it is normal. But be careful; There are times Jesus' teachings can be accomplished literally like forgiveness, and there are times they are figurative, like cutting off your arms. But after all, our life with Jesus is about examining our usual ways of doing and being, and to be willing to see the other side of reality.

The picture Jesus paints here may look odd and strange, but it is in line with his message on feeding the five thousand and others. It is meant to show in sharp contrast to the lavish Roman and Hellenistic dining practices.

Sounds nice on paper, but it challenges us to be church, or God's community. On the one hand, we are called to form community where we gather, to mingle, and to support one another. And on the other, we are also called to be different community from the world in a sense that we bring Jesus' teachings on hope and justice to the world. These two sides combined is what some people call it: The church as a hybrid community.

The word 'hybrid' is a trendy word these days. But we also need to think about it as our existence as a faith community. We are a hybrid community in a sense that we are a community just like any other community. Whether it is curling, painting club, hockey association, yoga school, etc, we are doing the exact same things these communities need to do: to meet, to set budget, to look after staff, set business goals, schedule meetings, buy equipment, and so on. We are just like another company in the world. Just because we are a Christian church cannot bypass doing these. We are part of the non-profit organization of society.

The other side of the hybrid is that we are a 'Christian' community. That's something 'Christian' about our existence. Otherwise, what's the point? What sets us apart or makes us different is the call of the gospel, Christian theology, and religious commitments. If we miss this part and do it poorly, we are just a community like everybody else. From the outside we see a sign that says church. But in reality, it is just another social community behaving just like another secular company.

To be attentive to the both sides of the hybrid is utmost importance to our purpose and mission; and in many ways, critical to our vitality and identity in the world. Jesus' message can be understood in this way where we who called our Christians and churches, need to do and think extra on top of what regular social communities do. We need to intentionally put effort to implement our understanding of the divine and the Creator's holy purpose for this community; despite it being constantly revised. Key

theological thoughts in this community such as love, kindness, forgiveness, unconditional, reconciliation, peace, justice, and many more, need to constantly be our guide and practice. Where some companies can do without paying attention to some of these, Christian churches cannot.

Is Jesus' message of inviting the poor and lame easy and logical to do? Not at all if all that we can think of is to be a regular community just like everybody else. Yet, if we dare to try, we give flesh to the theology of hospitality and welcoming. When we do that, suddenly, the theology of "All Are Welcome" is no longer just the lyrics in a hymn, but in our lives.

My friends, theology matters. Theology is not pie-in-the sky idea for theologians, but of utmost concern for all communities of faith. Practice what we preach is deeply important to us. How we live out the 'hybridity' of the Christian community can have the determining factor placed on the future of this community. Although hybridity isn't rocket science, it does challenge us greatly in terms of life-long trial and error. We mess up constantly, that is no surprise! But don't just give up trying again!

Although I say we mess up all the time, this is not a negative assessment of our practice. The opposite would be to say we have done exactly everything the Christian faith has demanded of us! Well! Do you know what that means? It means it is a perfect receipt for hypocrisy and self-delusion. For that, we Christians have done a ton!

Christians aren't perfect. Christian churches aren't perfect. A perfect church doesn't exist. What we need is do is constantly learning, revising, adjusting, repent and try again, with the help of the Holy Spirit of course. This is what Spirit has called us to do when it comes to Indigenous justice, women equality and ordination, racial justice, and welcoming LGBTQ2S community. Although we are nowhere near some of the ideals we preach such as forgiveness, love one another, seeking justice, and so on, it doesn't mean we should give up pushing these goals of our faith. Genuine Christian living doesn't require perfection, but the ability to identify shortcomings, and commit to

renewal, and reflect better the idea of holiness. That is another reason why true humility is needed.

Finally, three years come and gone! I am fortunate to have served you in this one of most unexpected journey of our lives. The pandemic is putting us in uncharted territory where no one previously thought it is comprehensible that we can close the door for Sunday worship. Now you know, yes we can, and need to! The ever-changing situation is always the context for our work. Pay attention to one another, listen to one another, really, be with one another and not remote from people, listening with respect, since we have no idea when what we initially thought may be a joke, fantasy, or unrealistic can be implemented in our lifetimes.

My wife and I will leave you with high regard of you. We take pleasure in knowing you, and I wish you God's blessing in your future endeavors. Thank you all for your well wishes, gifts, and kindness. We will miss you for sure!

P.S. If you like, follow The Centre for Christian Studies on Face Book, sign up for newsletters and so on; and know the latest from this Centre and my work there.
Blessings!