

The Bencke Family in Japan



January 2023: 97 番

Happy New Year!

In Japanese, it's a mouthful: Akemashite omedetougozaimasu. Kotoshimo yoroshiku onegaishimasu. (Said with several intermittent bows). Even after living here for over 20 years, it's still a lot to try and spin off the tongue, but I appreciate that it takes a few seconds to say, forcing two people to stand face-to-face and acknowledge one another's presence.

New Year is the big holiday in Japan for gathering family together. For us, this usually means going over to our friends' home, the Nishi family. However, since they are still within one year of Mr. Nishi's death, according to Buddhist custom, such celebrating is off-limits, or at the very least subdued. We paid our respects after the New Year when we joined Mr. Nishi's widow for a late dinner and uplifting conversation. Our daughter, Emilie, was here for the winter break so she was able to join as well. It was good to be *together*.

Relationships. They are so central to our lives, as members of a collective humanity, and as a Body of Christ. As the college where Patrick and I work (Kyushu Lutheran College) continues to struggle to recruit students within a context of a declining population and economic turmoil, this is one area where our small school shines. Being a small school allows us to build meaningful relationships that have depth and longevity. This is critical for what the church calls "mission." The real work of mission is not simply the *kerygma*, or the explicit stating of Jesus Christ as humanity's salvation. It is often the much more time-consuming, evolving, heart work and hard work of building and sustaining relationships.

Sometimes we are tempted to think of mission work as being the job of the assigned missionary for a congregation, or for the "outreach committee," or the "mission committee." I would argue that mission is central to our individual baptismal covenant. As Christians, we cultivate the field so the Holy Spirit can work—in both ourselves and the "other." Sometimes the "other" is also a Christian! Building one another up, encouraging one another, allowing each brick to lend aesthetic beauty and architectural stability to of God's kingdom is our mission. Evangelism is the work and fruit of the Holy Spirit through relationships built on the spirit and truth of the confident knowledge of Jesus Christ.

This past summer, we visited fifteen congregations or groups. Each visit was so special, with some of them being our seventh visit, and others being our first visit. We witnessed incredible enthusiasm of all those pastors, despite the challenges of online church and other issues. "Sundaes on Mondays" was resurrected at Word of Peace in Rogers, Minnesota, where a Monday night

worship was held. As an organist, I am always a little nerdy about church music traditions of the churches we visit, so First Lutheran Church in Bemidji, Minnesota was captivating. It was our last church visit before heading back to Japan and to my surprise, one of my former voice instructors from Gustavus—Dr. Jon Romer—had helped the church with the creation and installation of a new organ since our last visit in 2008. This wasn't just any organ though! This organ has a set of pipes that are Native American flute sounds, controlled by foot pedals to emulate the falling tones at the end of phrases. This PBS special is a detailed documentary about the organ, and the explanation about the flute sounds begins at about the 8-minute mark. <https://www.pbs.org/video/sacred-breath-first-lutheran-church-of-bemidjis-pipe-organ-ei3i9z/> We also learned about a new fad called “hatchet throwing” from some of the senior members of the congregation.

Another church we visited was Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Barnesville, Minnesota, which is about 2 seconds from the North Dakota border up on I94. Here we were welcomed to the congregation and participated in a Wednesday Worship night event where we broke bread (literally) and drank wine, then shared a meal together, after which we had some time to share music and held a short Q&A time to talk about mission as accompaniment and what that means (and does not mean!) in today's world. Church partners in Boone, Iowa and St. Petri in Story City showed tremendous hospitality (seriously, that strawberry pie was imbued with the Holy Spirit) during our visits, even showing us some new tricks to become more technically savvy for online projection of worship.

Connections were made, relationships were nurtured, and I believe that more than any other year, this home assignment was a salve for our parched souls. It was an honor to spend the eight weeks of travelling throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa to visit congregations, colleges, conferences, and rekindle the fire for our shared mission. Thank you again for your continued prayers, well-wishes, correspondence, and financial support. Our next scheduled home assignment will be in the summer of 2024, pending any other pandemics....

