

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. *2 Timothy 4:3-4*

Kaona

I am close to finishing my time in Korea, and here I am using a Hawaiian word. I do not want to risk misrepresenting the Hawaiian language, but the word “kaona” is pretty consistently translated as “hidden meaning,” for instance an unspoken reference in poetry or song. The passage from 2 Timothy was in the lectionary for yesterday, and I would suggest that many of us might recognize the kaona of some of today’s challenges in this holy word.

In fact, the issue of fake news came up a couple of times during my time in Seoul. Riverside EP Frances Lin and I attended the English traditional worship service at Young Nak Presbyterian Church, a huge and historic church. Two pioneer Korean-American clergywomen, Mary Paik and Unzu Lee—I believe Mary was the first Korean woman ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA)—come from families that were among the charter members of Young Nak some 80 years ago. In the sermon, the pastor used the term “Garbage In—Garbage Out” to warn against taking in misrepresentations of the Christian gospel, words that demonize people or give up on hope.

Sadly, I heard that the church in Korea, including the Presbyterian Church, has become aggressive in insisting that their leaders, even their members, sign written statements that condemn homosexuality as sin. I heard this from two dear friends: Rev. Dr. Hee-kyu “Heidi” Park, a minister member of our presbytery who is a pastoral counseling professor at Ewha Woman’s University, and Sung-hoi “Sean” Kim, an alum of San Francisco Theological Seminary (Southern California campus) who is now a member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea. Sean was elected last year to represent the Goyang-A district, on the outskirts of Seoul. Wikipedia says “Goyang A is widely regarded as a progressive and liberal stronghold” and that Sean won by a wide margin—that’s not surprising!

The anti-queer rage is strong enough that both Heidi and Sean have to be careful how they advocate for inclusivity. Heidi has more freedom, and she is doing some exciting work. She attends a historic and very activist church, Hyangrin Church, a Presbyterian church that counts among their founding members the theologian Byung-Mu Ahn, a founding father of Minjung theology. The church asked her to help members of the queer community who need counseling. They initially thought they could train lay people, but found that the people needed more in-depth counseling, so Heidi asked her students if they would be willing to help, and she now has 14 students counseling up to three clients each. So she is now running the only church-based counseling service for LGBTQ people in all of Korea.

As a politician, Sean has to be much more cautious. Even though he attends a church in the more progressive of the two main Presbyterian denominations, and he is not in leadership, he was pressured to sign this anti-gay statement. He is on a committee that was to approve the President’s nominee to represent South Korea on the UN Human Rights Council, and in the hearing the nominee spoke in graphic terms the reasons gays must be reversed. Sean pointed out that someone who speaks this way is not appropriate for a UN body protecting human rights, and for that he was personally condemned by the pastors of his own district, accusing him of not being Christian.

Sean had hoped that he could serve the church, but in the current climate, he would have to publicly condemn queer people in order to serve, so he went into politics instead. But he fondly remembers his time in seminary, with his studies and expansive theology and interactions with the diverse student body, and what he learned there still guides his work, and he still has hope that he is able to use his influence to help the poor and outcast in Korean society, which include not only queer people but also workers and immigrants.

In some ways, Sean's political work has kaona, as he is quietly doing God's will in the secular sphere. And on a lighter note, we had a wonderful time with Yvonne Harmon, elder at Northminster Presbyterian in Diamond Bar and immediate past moderator of the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii. Yvonne loves Korean dramas, and dreamed of coming to Korea to see the country that has become such a force in world culture today. Though she planned this as a solo trip, by God's providence she came at the same time we did, so we all had some great experiences—like having the 250+ delegates of Jeonju Presbytery sing “Happy Birthday” in Korean to Yvonne! And Yvonne got to dress in Korean period wear—so perhaps Yvonne offers some kaona of her own, as she reveals her true Korean identity.



May we all find ways to share God's love with the world: in the church and out in the world; in our community of birth and in our community of choice; in and with our own people and with people who seem different from us. In the end, all that matters is God's love for all of God's people, and all of God's creation. May we enjoy all that God has made.

Blessings,

Wendy