

2020-07-19 Being Human

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Kristen Brown]

Good morning, everyone! It is good to see you this morning and to be with you every Sunday as we do this together and meet together weekly, even though we are not meeting together in person. I miss seeing you on Sunday mornings in our worship services at the Artisan building, but it's wonderful to see you here every Sunday morning. And I have the privilege this morning of sharing a little bit with you from scripture, and our message today actually is a little bit different, so I'm going to give you a heads up on that – that it's a little bit different today. And I want to invite you into a project that I have been working on, really since the time that you have known me.

Most of you know that I am a doctoral student and I have been desperately trying to finish writing my dissertation. I was originally planning to be done last year and, you know, “best laid plans...”. That didn't happen, and then I was going to be done in April, and then, coronavirus! And so, now I am *not* done, and I hopefully will be done at the end of the summer, Lord willing. But in the meantime, I wanted to share with you just a little bit of some of the things that I've been working on, and really to introduce you to someone today.

So, a few of you know, in my dissertation I have been interacting with three particular theologians. They've become good friends of mine. Actually, all of them – I never got to meet any of them; they all passed away before I met them. But I would like to introduce you to one of them today and for us to think a little bit together about how this person's work could influence us as we're thinking about what it means to live as Christian people in the world.

So, as a part of my work I had the privilege of interacting with a Japanese theologian by the name of Kosuke Koyama. He was born in Japan just before World War II, so imagine the way that that experience shaped his life, and he studied in the United States in his twenties, he moved to Thailand in his thirties, to Singapore in his forties, New Zealand in his fifties, and back

to the United States, where he lived and worked at Union Theological Seminary in New York until he passed away in his eighties, which is about a decade ago, now. He had quite a life! He taught in prestigious schools, he edited journals, he ran a major center for the study of world Christianity, as well as a regional accrediting association of theological schools in southeast Asia. I mean, he oversaw a hundred schools that were doing work in southeast Asia. He published almost a hundred books and journal articles.

And all of this I am discovering as I'm getting into working on him, and had I known I would be reading so much and that he was quite so prolific, I don't know, I might have stepped back from choosing to interact with his work, but I am so glad I did and that I got to know him a little bit. So, I am going to introduce you to some of the things that he has, I think, to contribute to our thinking as we are looking to live, what it means to be Christians in this moment – this particular moment. So, he lived years ago, and yet I think what he says actually speaks a very timely word for us today.

One of the reasons I resonate with his work, I think, is because he writes like a person. So, you've probably all read books that are written as if not by a person, and as academics, sometimes we get that, sort of, people sometimes think that we're not really engaging. It's hard to read, maybe, some of the books that are written by people that work in the academy, but not Koyama. In his writing, he loves to tell stories, he asks questions. His published writings actually were sometimes viewed as not academic enough, and so he was sort of left out of some conversations that he actually had a lot to say. So for instance, rather than sort-of systematic arguments about some of these big words that we like to use, like “justification” and “soteriology,” we're really talking about, “What does it mean that Jesus saves?” Instead of sort-of weighing in to some of these philosophical arguments, he writes detailed accounts of the implications of Jesus' cross that says “had no handle.” He sort-of poses the question, “What does it mean that the cross didn't have a handle?”, and he compares that, in a little book of essays, he compares that to when we try to carry a lunchbox or a briefcase that has a handle, and that is neat and orderly and easy to pack and carry, and that is efficient for our use. He says the cross wasn't efficient; that wasn't the point. It doesn't have a handle on it; it's cumbersome.

And he uses that as a jumping off point to talk about a life of discipleship – what it really means for us when we're told to take up a cross with no handle. He says that's the Christian life, and he just sort of lets us sit there for you, for you to think about, “What would that mean for me to take that up and carry that in my life?”, rather than arguments on the nature of God's transcendence and imminence, right? Koyama asks the more childlike question, “Will the monsoon rains make God wet?” That's a question that's actually quite interesting to think

about. What does it mean for God to be us in our everyday lives? Again, it's a jumping-off point for what it means for us to think about God interacting with us on a daily basis. Koyama paints theology in what he calls "human pictures;" he relates God's presence to the daily experiences of people.

He was a wonderful person; as I said, I did not get to meet him, but I have talked to others who did, and they speak of his warmth, his genuineness, his kind eyes and gentle spirit. He chose presence with people as his basic orientation as a theologian and educator. He actually says that his whole orientation was to be involved in the world around him and the people around him. So, I wrote about him and what it means for us as theologians and educators, which is my field of study and my vocation, and I basically asked the question: how can his educational philosophy shape mine? And I'll tell you, the book that has most influenced me as I have been writing about this man as an educator is a little book he wrote in the middle of his career, I have it here, it's called *Three Mile an Hour God*. And it's published over 40 years ago now; as you notice, it doesn't have a fancy cover; it's not from a famous publishing house. But in this book, this world-renowned scholar writes a bunch of little essays about how the world is tempting us to be more efficient than God is. Forty years ago he wrote it, and I would say it has only gotten to be more relevant.

So, while whole dissertations can and have been written on this man, today we're going to talk about just this one small insight from his work, and it comes from this book. So when he wrote this, Koyama was concerned about some of the aspects of culture that he saw around him that he considered to be dehumanizing. And one of the primary ways he saw this playing out was our "need for speed." You know, as I think about it, he's writing in 1979 and he could have been writing yesterday, because everything in our lives is so fast these days. It seems like our goal is to get faster and faster. We have better processors in our computers and smartphones, and more horsepower in our cars, and drive through groceries, and meals that are delivered to our door in 20 minutes or less.

We're – I mean I, I won't throw this on you – I am personally annoyed when Amazon can't get my shipment to me in two days, right? At what point did that become an expectation in my life? There's almost nothing worse today, right, than slow Internet speeds? [chuckles] And I'm the first one to sign up for some of these things, especially now that I'm in what seems like endless video calls every week, and you know, people are freezing up on the screen and you can't hear them. But, I think all of this is our culture saying something to us and forming us in certain ways with certain expectations. And that was really Koyama's main point: Are we aware of the formation that is happening in our lives? And we're not going to talk about today, you know,

hashtag first-world problems, and the intricate and complex situation of world development; those are things that we can talk about on another day. But I do think it is a good moment for reflection for us about our own engagement in the world as human beings. So, that was the title of my sermon today, if you saw it on the web: “What does it mean to be human?”

This current season has been a strange one for me, and maybe for you. In some ways it seems like the world slowed down and it stopped working. Maybe *you* stopped working and are having to find new ways to just get by and it's taking up all of your time. Because in many ways, while the world slowed down, this slowdown required us all to speed up in different ways. The rate of change and information and our responses to it has been increasing; it's like every day something new comes at me and I'm being asked to make decisions about it, for myself and for other people, in the constantly moving and shifting landscape. There have been no breaks. Really, especially this year, as the world has changed and continues to change every day, I was thinking back to January and what I thought the year would bring, which honestly feels like ten years ago. If I think about the things that are actually happening in my life and in the world in January, it feels like a whole lifetime ago, and it was really six months ago, because so much has been happening in these last six months.

But, in this very busy and usual season I have returned to something Koyama writes about in this book. He points out that, while the world pushes us at a fast pace, we human beings are actually very slow. It's part of what it means for us to be human. The average human – and you can Google this – walks at a pace of three miles an hour, and what Koyama reminds us in this book is that, instead of speeding us up to some more efficient pace to get more done in our lives, that God actually chose to slow down. In Jesus, God came and walked with us at our pace. The human being Jesus walked three miles an hour. Now, I read that in this book and it struck me as such an odd idea. I mean, I know that it's true – I believe in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the humanness of all of that – but I so often expect God to be so much faster than three miles an hour. That's a twenty-minute mile for all of you runners and walkers out there. [chuckles]

And sometimes I get caught up in the idea that God expects me to be faster than 3 miles an hour. But Koyama said God walks at 3 miles an hour because it is the pace that love walks. Because God loves us, God walks the pace of love. That image has stuck with me through a season of busyness. And now when I have a frantic moment in my life - which does seem to happen quite a lot for me - this question pops up for me. What would it look like for me to walk at the pace of love? The answer to that question doesn't always look the same. Sometimes it means I work hard because somebody is counting on me to do something. Sometimes it means

I need to be more interruptible, or that I need to be able to set my agenda aside to be with the person that's right in front of me, or to be responsive to somebody. Sometimes it means I need to be more loving to myself -I learned- in the way that I schedule all my meetings and say yes to things when people ask, because I am just a person, which means that I have limits. Sometimes it means resetting my expectations for those I work with so that I love my coworkers as I love myself. Depending on your situation you might have other items that you would add to that list.

But just stopping to ask the question has helped me to reorient my moment, my day, my schedule, my ambitions, and has challenged me to re-pace my life. We read today the passage from Matthew 11 that I selected to sort of anchor our discussions, or reflections today, and today in Matthew Chapter 11 Jesus says "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." The picture Jesus paints in this passage is of a yoke of oxen who are yoked together. And the reason for a yoke is for pacing, right? So that these oxen who are pulling together will learn to keep pace with one another. Koyama's description of the 3 mile an hour God reminds me that I am invited to God's pace of life. And that God has chosen to walk with me, to walk with us through presence with us at the pace of love. It might be a hard time to think about, for you, going slower. I know I've had to wrestle with that a little bit. With so much uncertainty and injustice, and incompetence that is swirling around and with anxieties high, it feels like it's the wrong time to go slow. Or maybe we think it's not even really possible.

So here's what I would say. If we don't think intentionally about slowing, about living more human lives, we actually risk dehumanizing ourselves and those around us. Because we are merely human, and that needs to matter in the way that we live our lives. So I stopped to think about some of the ways I've been growing as a slow person - and there are many. And also ways that I can continue to grow as a slow person. Letting myself be just human. And here are a few things that have reminded me in the past month or so to slow down and that love walks slowly. So if you have ...um...I don't know, I've been thinking a lot about solidarity, and the way it sometimes demands slowness. So if you've been a part of any of the Black Lives Matter events in the last, you know, few months, or even in years past. We've had some in our city in year's past. I think some of the marches that we've had to end gun violence or other reasons that we have taken to the streets with our bodies. If you've ever been a part of any large group of people trying to move in the same direction, you have probably experienced the slowness of solidarity. Large groups of people move slowly. And in many ways I'm kind of not ok with the slowness, because justice has been too slow. And yet in activism - even in our activism - I have been reminded that we are merely human. And so we walk with each other, right? We pace our

walk with others around us. It is what solidarity looks like. We show up and we let those who are most affected take the lead and they set our pace for us and we re-pace our life. It's not just marching or activism that has reminded me lately. Sort of the situation of the world that we're in and add our new need to be with people at a physical distance.

So things like, every time I go to the grocery store I am reminded of the physical presence of other people in new ways, and how it changes the way that I need to live in the world. Right now, so, I go to the grocery store and I've got to keep my 6 feet of distance, right? And sometimes it means I need to actually just stand and wait while other people are making their selections and choices. And normally we would just do our own thing and keep our own pace and keep going, but right now we're in this sort of cultural dance where we are all present in new ways with one another and attending to other people in new ways. For me it's been a reminder that we're all here, we are all taking up space, and we need to actually be able to see people and allow people to take up all the space that they take up. And that actually it makes us slower, but it also makes us more human. One other way I have been reminded is - and thank you Jessie for the book today - because it is actually in my, like, regular rhythm of paying attention to my breathing that I am reminded to slow down and to be human. So you know we've done this quite a bit at Zoom church, we'll sometimes start with breathing exercises or...we do that, you know, when we're meeting at the Artisan building as well. And we, you know, will stop and count, and slow down. And especially now, in the middle of this global pandemic that is stealing peoples' breath, it is a good reminder for me that breath is a gift. So to spend just a few minutes of sitting quietly and attending to my slow breathing reminds me just how human I am, and that every breath I have comes to me from God, that I am a dependent person.

So all of these things have slowed me down over the past few months. I also garden, that's good, that slows me down. There's only so much I can do as a gardener, and of course I want, you know, all of my vegetables right now but some of them, it's just not their season yet. And so to live in a rhythm that is outside of my control is one of the important things that I have tried to incorporate into my life. These little things, and I'm sure there are more, they've given me new insights into the world and the way it is trying to speed me up. And I am reminded to reset the pace of my mind and body to a more human pace. Koyama helped me to realize that one of the most important things I could do for myself from students in my classes, for my friends and colleagues, is to remember that I am human, and that we are human, and to make space for that even in our distance from each other right now. Our humanity has not changed. Even though we don't necessarily see each other in our full 3D aspect as often. But it's good to

be merely human and to be reminded of that in a world that sometimes can challenge us to be superhuman.

So what do we do with this? Well as we educators know, it's always a good idea to practice what we are learning. So I have a couple of practices for us on slowing down. And you might have some other thoughts already that have come to your mind about how you can practice being slower this week. And I encourage you to do that. And maybe to take a few minutes this afternoon to look ahead at your week to think about where you might add intentional slowness into your life. But here's a couple of ideas to get you started. One is to actually take a walk. And not an exercising walk, when you are exercising, right? When you are trying to speed up. But maybe take a prayer walk through your neighborhood. Pay attention to what you see well God brings to light for you in the world around you. Notice things that you've never maybe noticed before. One other thing I noticed this week I type fast I take much faster than I write, actually, and especially if my writing is going to be legible to another human person. So maybe, one practice for me is to practice handwriting letters to people. So write a letter this week to a friend maybe, and practice your slow penmanship. Sort of paying attention to each letter and each word that you're writing. I've known other people that have really benefited, actually, from that practice in relation to scripture. Instead of just, you know, reading as fast as you can and getting through a large portion of Scripture, maybe take a smaller portion and hand write it. And spend time paying attention to the words that you're writing. Or maybe it's as simple as starting your day with five slow measured breaths. Allowing yourself the space to pay attention to every breath in and every breath out. It's a good reminder of the gift of breath and that was God's original gift to us. It is also what continues to sustain our lives.

You'll have other things that you'll do this week, I'm sure, in your efforts to slow down and I guess I hope this short reflection from this friend of mine - who I hope will become a friend of yours - that it will remind you just to pay attention to who you are this week to be the full human that God made you to be. So as the service continues, I would invite you to think about that, and spend a little time as music plays and as we take communion together, to notice what it means that you are a human being. And to be merely human, because it is who God created you to be. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).