**Three Words Sermon**

**Intro**

Good morning Covenant Grove. My name is Grant Buchholtz. Together with my wife, Miho, and our two girls, Allie and Zoe, we have been serving as ECC missionaries for the past twelve years (**Image**). Seven years ago, we planted Tokyo Life Church. We are glad to be back in America for six months and able to be here with you today.

I hate languages. Just thought I would start with that. Maybe you are like me, in that they don’t come easy. From kindergarten through grad school, my only C’s were in French and Greek. This is why I find it so ironic how God has led my life. I have now preached in English, French, and Japanese. Yet, I still have a long way to go with my Japanese.

Over the past dozen years of living in Japan, there has been a love/hate relationship with the language. I studied it to learn this tool that would enable me to do our ministry. I desperately want to be able to engage in conversation in Japanese. As I learned Japanese, I discovered certain words that don’t exist in English. Languages have limitations. In Hebrew, the word “Hesed” is profound and beautiful. We try to translate it with lovingkindness, love, or compassion; but it is deeper than that. Shalom gets translated as peace; but is deeper that just peace or harmony. Perhaps you have words in your own language that can get lost in translation.

This morning I want to share God’s dream for the church through exploring three Japanese words. I hope to weave in stories of how God has been at work at Tokyo Life Church. But also consider who are you to become as a community?

**Body**

1. Tsundoku （積ん読）

The first word is “Tsundoku.” The two Japanese characters mean “to pile up or amass” and “read.” This unique Japanese word doesn’t have an equivalent word in English. It basically means to accumulate books but not read them. Given how most homes or apartments there are small, it doesn’t take long to fill up your space (**Image**). Even though I now mostly by e-books, due to limited bookshelf space, this doesn’t mean I can’t hoard books on the Kindle app.

Maybe it’s not books for you. But, isn’t it so easy to accumulate things? They could be good things, necessary items for your life. Yet, I am sure we can all think about purchases that were made with great intentions but continue to collect dust or sit on a shelf somewhere. This has worked to our advantage while being back in America. We’ve been able to borrow an unused car, TV and golf clubs. God has given us gifts, talents, possessions, and resources to be used for His glory.

Why do I bring up this word? Because I believe the image of hoarding books can be related to how we use what God has given us. How we have been designed. One of the missions of Tokyo Life Church is to help people connect with God’s purposes. One aspect is using your gifts for God and the community.

Our church is now 7 years old. Yet, for over 1.5 years, our church lived online during the pandemic. We just started to meet back in person in November (**Image**). Now, we needed to return to America for our 6-month Home Assignment in March. What initially was fear about how our young church would do with our absence turned into excitement. From our beginning, especially with two young girls, we established a team-based culture. Despite how many Japanese churches expect the pastor to do everything, we knew that we needed to equip and unleash as many people as possible to serve and lead. This six-month season is testing and stretching that idea, as they take ownership and step up to lead. During the pandemic, people’s involvement was limited. Instead of thirty people serving on any given Sunday, a handful of people lead our children’s ministry through Zoom, filmed and edited our service, or recorded our worship songs. It would be easy to fall into a passive rhythm with our faith. But, as Ed Stetzer points out, “the moment we were in has not paused the mission we are on.” God was still at work during the pandemic. He is still at work right now as we come back together. And God wants all of us engaged in His mission.

This idea is based upon Ephesians 4. Paul writes about God giving the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to equip his people for works of service. So that the body of Christ may be built up.…and become mature. (**Eph. 4:11-13**). The intention has never been to have these pioneers and leaders only do ministry for the people. But, with the people. They are not passive recipients, but engaged participants. Teammates. Co-workers. We don’t become mature just by taking notes in a class. It comes from living out our faith. Active. Involved.

A negative trait in many traditional Japanese churches is the expectations placed on the pastor. He is the paid professional. The pastor should do all the preaching, teaching, evangelism. He is the expert. This is an unfortunate attitude that sidelines so many Christians from joining in God’s mission. In the early days of our church, being a team was so critical. With only a few hands, most people were engaged in all kinds of ministry. Sing one week. Lead Lifekids the next week. Set up. Translate. Greet people. It may have even been multiple things in the same service! Maybe some of you remember the early days of Hope. It may have been similar here. Everybody seemed to recognize how valuable their presence was in our small community. As you’ve grown, it may be easier to assume that others can serve. Maybe they are more gifted. And we can disengage.

Our goal is to become like Christ. Become mature in our faith. This doesn’t happen just through knowledge acquisition. God has made you unique. He has gifted you a certain way. You’ve had particular experiences that can be used or redeemed for God’s good. Don’t waste them like those books that pile up, left untouched. Don’t hoard the treasures that God has given you. Unleash whatever God has given you to impact this community, this city, and the world for God’s glory.

We are designed to connect with God’s purposes. Not to be “tsundoku,” where we accumulate and leave unused. It is like the man who was given a talent and he buried it, rather than invest it. He squandered the gifts that God gave him. Missed out on being a blessing.

1. Kizuna (絆)

The next word is “Kizuna.” (**Image**) After the 3.11 tsunami eleven years ago, this word was chosen as the word of the year in Japan. The image is a thread and middle. it’s meaning is about a bond or connection between people. As you can imagine after that incredible natural disaster, this bond and unity was essential for our recovery. The church mobilized together to bring relief to Tohoku. Mission groups and denominations worked together in incredible unity. I was amazed to see the Japanese value of harmony lived out. Nobody complained about rationing food or electricity. Companies raised the temperature at their offices to reduce energy use. Train stations turned off escalators; which just became stairs. Comedian Mitch Hedberg said, “An escalator can never break; it can only become stairs. You never see an Escalator temporarily out of order sign, just escalator temporarily stairs. Sorry for the convenience.” It truly was living out this image of the bonds between people. The thread that connects us all. Together, we overcame this tragedy and are moving forward. This same impulse allowed Japan to weather the pandemic better than many other countries. There are strengths and weaknesses in every culture. I remember in March 2020 worrying about how bad things could get in America. We love our freedom and individual rights, which can be great. But, as we saw, it can also work against our collective cooperation for the good of our neighbors. As Japan is a collective society, most people sacrificed and work hard to get through this pandemic together. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, we talk about being “in it together.” I am thankful that this was the attitude in our church and city.

God did not design us to be on our own. We were created for relationships. With God Himself, but also with others. This is the beauty and power of the church. We are part of God’s family. The body of Christ. Members. Brothers and Sisters. Co-workers in God’s work. Teammates.

We are designed to connect with God’s people. Notice what Paul writes as we continue in Ephesians 4. **Verses 15-16**, “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” As part of the body of Christ, these ligaments are like threads, connecting us together. Using the image in 1 Corinthians 12, we are various parts in the body (**Image**). You may function as the foot, ear, or elbow. But, we are all needed. Together, being a part of the church allows us to grow and be built up. But, your presence also helps build up somebody else. As we come out of the pandemic, our church and most churches are facing the challenge of renewing our spiritual rhythms and habits. Being hybrid meant that we have less people present to serve. People were initially hesitant to commit with children’s ministry or other areas. This may be a reality here too. Your community needs your presence.

A couple years ago, Maggie and Yuki, who were college students, joined our church. Even though he was not yet a Christian, he quickly got connected into our community and college group. Despite the short time, they felt like this church was family. During the pandemic, Maggie returned back her home in Hong Kong. God used this time to grow their faith. Yuki came to Christ, while Maggie’s faith was strengthened. She made the decision to get baptized, but wanted to do it at our church. God worked it out that she was able to come and work at the Olympics last summer, then got baptized afterwards (**Image**). Her small group got to celebrate this moment in her life (**Image**). Our dream is that whether we are 15 or 150, we will always retain this culture of family and community. I imagine this is a similar value here at Hope.

Despite Tokyo being the largest city in the world, it can also be one of the loneliest. New York and Jersey may be the same. You are surrounded by people in your apartment complex or train, but they are all strangers. You work long hours. Have little time for relationships. Families are spread thin with little time together. This sense of isolation and loneliness was a driving force in why we wanted to start a church, as well as the kind of church we wanted to create. Years ago, a Japanese teen told us about her parents divorce. Feeling shame, her mom told her not to talk about this with her neighbors, friends, or teacher. Fortunately, she felt safe to talk with Miho about this. Our hearts broke as we realized what people may be going through but have no place to unload their burdens. Nobody to talk with. No safe community to truly open up what is happening in their lives and receive grace, understanding, and healing. We’re grateful that several people trusted us enough to share their depression or struggle with suicidal thoughts. The need for community became even stronger during the pandemic. I am sure that there was heartbreak and grief here. In our church, several members lost parents or brothers back home, but weren’t able to visit or attend the funerals. Two Filipino families lost brothers in their 40s, which was unexpected and devastating. We are thankful that they had some community to walk with them through this period of grief.

We sense that evangelism often happens in our church first by belonging before believing. People are desperate for friendships and community. New people visit our church for all kinds of reasons. Maybe they just want to practice their English. Maybe they are looking for friends. There may be various reasons why people first come into your Hope community. Whatever the motivation, we begin there. Relationships form. Trust develops. Then, we help them take steps closer to find hope in Christ. Being a part of a community is crucial. Most Japanese may have never met a Christian before or know nothing about Jesus or the Bible. What they see in our church community communicates what God is like. We are living witnesses, for good or ill.

The church at its best fosters true community. A safe place where we can be known, where we can be honest with each other, and where we find strength and hope to grow. If the goal is becoming more like Christ, then we desperately need each other and God to be changed.

God desires us to connect with God’s people. Like “kizuna,” we need those threads and connections with others. As a pastor, it was easy to take our Sunday services for granted. I see our people every week. When that was taken away, I was surprised by how much joy I felt when we had our first outdoor gathering in the Fall of 2020. Six months and finally we got to see each other face to face (or mask to mask). We need each other.

1. Kintsugi (金継ぎ)

The final word in “Kintsugi,” The two characters mean gold and patch/graft. One day I hope to own a piece of this unique pottery (**Image**). I am not sure how it originally started. Maybe instead of wasting a broken vase, an inventive potter tried to mend it with a special lacquer. By mixing gold into the lacquer, it not only repaired a broken and useless pot or plate, but transformed it into a work of art. Those cracks could have been embarrassing reminders, but now are the focal point of beauty. In the hands of that master artisan, a wasted or ruined item has been restored into something better than the original.

This is the story of our lives in the hands of God. Before Christ, no matter our levels of success or accomplishment, we are broken and disconnected from God. We are in need of hope. Of being restored. God designed us to connect to Him personally. This is what drove us to start Tokyo Life Church. Millions of people around us know nothing about God’s love and the possibility to be restored. To find true life. Real hope.

One of the amazing realities in God’s Kingdom is that He uses ordinary or broken people like us and you. Paul uses this odd metaphor to describe us. He calls us “jars of clay” that display power that is from God and not ourselves (**2 Cor. 4:7)**. I love this pottery imagery. We are vessels, used by God. Though pottery may be fragile and weak, in the right hands, it can bring water to the thirsty or food to the hungry. In essence, jars can bring life to those in desperate need. It may not be the most ornate, fancy, or beautiful, but is useful in God’s hands.

In an earlier letter to the Corinthian church, Paul reminded them how God used the foolish to shame the wise. We may not be from noble birth, in the most elite class, but God continues to use ordinary people who are available and do incredible things through their lives (**1 Cor. 1:26-28**). Like that gold-lined pottery, God can take normal vessels and transform them into something special. I would never have imagined that God would take me from Iowa to use me in such an influential city like Tokyo. As a young boy with a speech impediment, I wouldn’t have predicted that I am not only a communicator but get to train students in preaching at Tokyo Christian University. If God use somebody like me with a simple background, then He can definitely use anybody.

It is so easy to see what we lack or our failures and write ourselves off. Yet, God can use each of us. As we connect with God, unimaginable things can happen. He can change us. Patch our broken parts with gold. Redeem us to something better than we were. And use us to bring more healing and transformation to those around us. Over a year ago, we heard more and more stories of homelessness in our part of Tokyo; Ikebukuro. We felt God calling us to respond in some way. So, we began serving meals and supplies each month (**Image**). As they lined up, we would try to talk with them and get to know them, their names, and their stories. One time Miho was able to share her testimony with one guy about God restoring her from depression in high school. One guy, Kaneko-san, was standing in line behind this guy and overheard her story. He didn’t say anything that day. But, the next month, he told Miho that as he heard her story, he felt that he could trust us. He then asked for her to pray for him. Now, every time, he seeks us out to talk for twenty minutes and be prayed over. Author Henri Nouwen wrote a book titled “The Wounded Healer.” I love that imagery. We are all broken and yet have been restored by God. He can use each of us to bring healing to others, despite of or maybe because of our particular brokenness and pain.

God’s desire is for us to connect with Him personally. And help others to connect with God. Then, our broken parts can be restored to wholeness and something beautiful.

**Conclusion**

God’s dream for the church is to be a community that connects to God personally, with God’s people, and to God’s purposes.

This is my hope for our church. This is my hope for your church. We actively engage with God’s purposes in our world. We connect as a community. And, we draw others to discover the life and hope that can only be found in Jesus. Tsundoku, kizuna, kintsugi. Connecting to God’s purposes, to God’s people, and with God personally.