



The Confession of Saint Peter 2009

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, January 18, 2009*

Matthew 16:13-19:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The writer Julia Alvarez has said: “I am a Dominican, hyphen, American. As a fiction writer, I find that the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen – the place where two worlds collide or blend together.”

The most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen. Let’s take a look at that hyphen.

I am particularly drawn toward the short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian, hyphen, American who probes the tension of living uncomfortably as an immigrant; Indian roots now planted in American soil. For some reason, I find the tension attractive. Lahiri does not soften the challenges created, but provokes a recognition (at least within me) that ultimately we are not quite home, not finally settled; that we reside here – in this land, in our own skin – but temporarily, on our way.

I was rector of a congregation in Jersey City which, though tiny, had seventeen nationalities represented on a good Sunday – Ghanaian, Pakistani, Trinidadian. When I arrived I looked forward to what I imagined would be a colorful cultural smorgasbord. What I quickly learned, however, was that – being recent immigrants – everyone was eager to blend in, minimize their differences, be “American,” hide that hyphen at any cost.

I can’t blame them. We Euro, hyphen, Americans have mastered that trick. Through myth-making and the exercise of power over successive generations, we’ve established our particular Euro, hyphen, American experience as normative. Be white, like me, and you’re in.

I can only hope and imagine how the experience of African, hyphen, Americans shall be changed with Tuesday’s inauguration; that ten and twelve-year-old girls and boys will grow up seeing someone who looks like them with lovely darker skin, living in the White House. A milestone on the journey, the fruit of prophet’s dreams, mother’s tears, lives sacrificed, unbelievable courage and endurance.

What are the hyphens that define you? Is anything terribly exciting there, in that realm? Collisions? Convergences?

I’m primarily interested in only one hyphen: we are Christian Americans – which is not a pairing of identities we hear used often. Oh, we chime in on the relation between church and state, the separation thereof, and the tension in our public practice. But what about within us as individuals, as Christian, hyphen, Americans. What collides? What converges there?

Then Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

It all comes down to this, doesn’t it? The one question. Hangs in the air, waiting for an answer, waiting for your answer, waiting for your answer today. Jesus asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” This is, as Benedictine Laurence Freeman, has put it, “a redemptive question” – a question potent with redemption, that merits, nay, insists, that we enter in to it, ask it, probe it, go in deeper, answer it, time and again, through the course of our lives: That redemption is to be found in the probing and the praying and the potent possibilities.

On that day, at that hour, Simon Peter replied, “you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Which is to say, you are the fulfillment of all of the expectations of our people, who have been anticipating you, this moment, for centuries.

Jesus affirms this response – “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!” – then adds in the following verses, and I paraphrase – ‘I am the Messiah; I must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of my people, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’ When Peter rebukes him – says, ‘No! This must never happen to you, Lord.’ – Jesus rebukes him: ‘Get behind me Satan; you cannot interfere with what must be.’

The exchange captures the dilemma: you are the fulfillment of all dreams, the savior of our people, and the cost to you, as well as the cost to those of us who love and follow you, is nothing less than our blood, our breath, our life.

As an aside, it’s long been a rather tedious joke from pulpits to poke fun at Peter’s obtuseness, the way he swings as we see here from stunning insight – ‘you are the messiah’ – to clumsy selfishness – ‘no, it can’t happen to you.’ “He just doesn’t get it; what a lunk,” we like to say. Perhaps Peter is one of those people who, like me, has to speak in order to find out what he thinks; just put it out there, and see what it sounds like; a thought in progress, a Christian, hyphen, Galilean, in the making.

What does it mean for us to be Christian Americans? I believe such an identity creates, or ought to create, an overwhelming conflict, or at least a profound tension. Following Jesus makes extreme claims upon us – of compassion, justice, sacrifice, generosity. The fact that we are Christian Americans ought to be a source of considerable angst. Is it? I don’t think so; not for most of us. We keep it sort of blurry, blended.

Just like recent immigrants, we’ve got to survive, got to get by. We don’t have the emotional energy and fortitude – and it may not even be healthy – to reside perpetually in a sustained state of crisis. So we soften the differences, chisel down the hard edges. But at what price?

I wonder if we think the various identities at the other end of our hyphens are somehow optional, as if we could choose to be male or female, choose to be of this lineage or that. I think we have less choice in the matter than we like to tell ourselves. You are your parents’ offspring; their blood courses in your blood. You are God’s offspring; beloved child, God’s spirit is breath of life in your spirit. Said Jesus in the Gospel of John (15:16): “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.... I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

It is hard for me to imagine not being Christian. I don’t mean because I think about being Christian all the time; I mean because so much of what it means I have received as a given – which I hasten to say is not the same as behaving as a Christian ought. Even when unspoken, it is assumed that the norm, though challenging, is that I, that we, are to love one another, to love neighbors and strangers, that we are to help those in need, to forgive and seek forgiveness, seek justice and peace, strive for equity, be good stewards of the gifts entrusted to us. All this comes alive – collides or blends – at the place where Christian meets polis, where Christian meets political power, economic reality, legal justice system, capitalism and consumerism; where following the cross encounters following the flag. These are really places of excitement and potential. As our parish history team researches and tells the stories of St. Peter’s first 250 years, the story gains energy at the hyphen, where we as people of faith engaged the critical issues of the day: Independence from Britain, slavery and Civil War, immigration and industry, urban decline and renewal. What the records apparently show – not surprisingly – is that we were not all of the same mind on these matters; rather, that we prayed and thought, and taught and debated, answered the questions, and made choices of faith, with integrity, the best we knew how.

You are familiar perhaps, with an old story. A Cherokee elder was teaching his children about life.

“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to them.

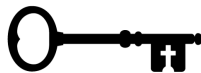
“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, guilt, resentment, lies, and false pride.” He continued, “The other is good - he is joy, love, hope, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too.”

The grandchildren thought about it and after a minute one of them asked, “Which wolf will win?”

The elder replied, “The one you feed.”

I do not mean to suggest that Christian American is a conflict between good and evil – or evil and good; nor to suggest that one should or will win – not at all. I believe we embody each with passion and conviction. Yet I also believe, as the Cherokee tale suggests, that in order for the elements within us to thrive, we must feed and nurture them. Thus, we rejoice in this nation’s capacity to take a new step toward a more perfect union. So, too, do we feast upon God’s Word and at God’s table of abundant grace. To the one we pledge our allegiance – as eagles soar, to the other we confess our faith – committed anew to the Way of Christ Jesus.

Ultimately, in the consummation of God’s dream, in the kingdom of God, the differences and tensions will fall away; all shall be one in God. In the meantime, however, during this journey, let us attend to our distinct inheritance as children of God, and the potent possibility thereof.



Open hearts. Open minds.