

At The Intersection of Heaven and Earth

"A big tough Samurai once went to see a little monk.

"Monk," he says, in a voice accustomed to instant obedience, "teach me about heaven and hell!"

The monk looks up at this mighty warrior and replies with utter disdain,

"Teach you about heaven and hell!

I can't teach you about anything.

You're dirty.

You smell.

Your blade is rusty.

You're a disgrace, an embarrassment to the Samurai class.

Get out of my sight.

I can't stand you!"

The Samurai is furious.

He shakes, gets all red in the face, he is speechless with rage.

He pulls out his sword and raises it, ready to strike the monk.

"That's hell," says the monk softly.

The Samurai is overwhelmed by the compassion and surrender of this little man who has offered his life to give this teaching, to show him hell!

He slowly puts down his sword..... he feels filled with gratitude and peace.

"And that's heaven," says the monk." Kurtz, Experiencing Spirituality, 35-6.

I like this story, especially today, because some see today's gospel lesson as a time when Jesus hands over power and authority to Peter, meaning it will be up to Peter and those who follow him to make up the rules for this new church, to set the

boundaries as to who's in and who's out, to be, in other words, the gatekeeper of all things related to God.

Not only is this reading the basis for the Roman and Anglican Churches insistence on the power of apostolic succession, but there's a million jokes that have St. Peter himself standing at heaven's gate giving a thumbs up or a thumbs down to every soul who finds herself in the next life.

Even Archbishop Tutu got in the act this week during his visit with us in Honolulu; telling the story of Nelson Mandela arriving at heaven's gate as St. Peter hustles out to greet him with cellphone in hand so he can take a selfie with Mr. Mandela!

But in fact, I'm not so sure that that's what going on today.

Instead, I think what Jesus is up to is a lot closer to that little monk teaching the Samurai about heaven and hell than dubbing Peter the first CEO in Christ's church.

The first hint of that is **where** Jesus decides to ask the question that he asks today: "who do people,, who do **you**, say that I am?"

They are in the town of Caesarea Phillipi, about as far as you can get from Nazareth and still be in Israel.

And what's so special about Caesarea-Phillipi, you ask?

Well, it's where Herod has built great monuments to Rome and to Caesar, and later Herod's son will even rename the whole city simply Caesarea.

It's as if Jesus takes the disciples to the Pentagon, or to Tiananmen Square or to the Kremlin.

He's got them in a place where the powers of our best human thinking are on full and proud display: thinking that says "we better look out for number one," thinking that says "might makes right," thinking that says "avoid death at all costs."

These are the rules we live by.

Peter knows these rules very well.

And yet Peter, standing there at the intersection between Jesus and Caesar, at the intersection between heaven's ways and the ways of earth, Peter is given the great gift of insight into who and what Jesus is.

And while it will take some time for him to grasp the totality of this insight, what he will eventually come to see is that "Caesar isn't Lord, Jesus is.

Putin is not the Son of God, Jesus is.

The Economy is not the authority under which we must organize our lives; Jesus is.

Jesus isn't inviting us into a religion that is a cheerleader for America's kingdom; Jesus is inviting us into an entirely new kingdom." McClaren, paraphrased.

And there is even more that Peter will eventually come to see; after he denies Jesus, after he deserts Jesus, after he discovers the empty tomb, after he is restored by Jesus at that barbecue on the beach following the resurrection; he will learn that these things are true:

"Violence cannot defeat violence.

Hate cannot defeat hate.

Fear cannot defeat fear.

God's way is different.

God achieves victory through defeat,

glory through shame,

strength through weakness,

leadership through serving,

life through death.

And God invites all who claim Jesus as their Lord to walk this same path.

Certainly this upside down way caused Peter great consternation.

It causes us all great consternation.

It's not the kind of change in one's point of view that happens quickly or easily." McClaren, paraphrased.

Not for Peter.

Not for us.

But with the challenge to take up this new way comes a new kind of power.

Jesus says today that what we bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and what we loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

We last heard these words at Pentecost, when Jesus gives to us the power to bind and loose sins.

And as we discovered at Pentecost, we can only truly exercise that power if our standpoint is on the solid rock of forgiveness; only with the heart of forgiveness can we distinguish the good from the bad and the ugly.

Just so today, when Jesus speaks of the power to bind and loose; talking not about sins, but about the rules and regulations and traditions of the faith community.

Just as Jesus reinterprets the rules and regulations and traditions of the faith community not through rigid legalisms but through the eyes of human need, through the eyes of compassion, by healing on the sabbath and eating with notorious sinners and forgiving sins freely, so he instructs us to do likewise.

It seems what Jesus is telling us is that no church rule or regulation is unchangeable because the living God remains with us and for us and among us every single day.

And because the power of the living God is here in our midst, always and for all time, all rules and regulations and traditions are subject to change if that change serves human need, if the change serves human compassion: so today we ordain women into the clergy, we ordain people of different sexual orientations, we open our doors to people of all places and races and social classes, because **we** are recipients of the great power to bind and loose when mercy and compassion and kindness are served by such changes.

Today we stand with the apostles, we stand with that little monk and the giant Samurai, at the intersection between heaven and earth.

It is precisely at that intersection where we Christians are called to live, each and every day.

And as we stand in that place, the question asked every day of me, and of you, is this:

Shall we confront the needs of our world with violence and insults and rage; or shall we confront the needs of our world with quiet words of understanding, with warm gestures of compassion, with gratitude and surrender?

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