

Confessions of a Resident Alien  
by Rev. Oommen K. Thomas

Luke 24: 13-32

March 31, 2008

I dedicate this sermon to all who believed in me even when I did not believe in myself. That includes my grandparents, as well as some of you.

When our moderator, Judy Mitchell, asked me to preach, I thought that would be easy. The more I thought about it this has been a struggle. Let me tell you why. I was told by the best in the business of homiletics not to use oneself as an example unless it is absolutely essential. All of us have a story. But we don't share them. Even after almost two decades in this Presbytery, most of you don't know who I am. Recently two of our colleagues made a covenant to get to know each other better and asked us to do the same. This is part of the inspiration for this sermon. This is how I see their intention. We share who we are—our identity, what we are called to do—polity, and how we practice our Call—praxis. If I take the scripture for today as a post resurrection revelation “Jesus took bread, broke and blessed it and gave it to them and they recognized him.”

Where I Was Taken From

I was born towards the end of the Second World War in a small village in Kerala, the southern-most state of India. I grew up with an extended family of three generations. As the oldest grandchild, I was loved by all. Both sides of my family were very religious and I was dedicated to God's work at a young age. Even as a young boy, I was reminded that our family inherited the Christian faith from Apostle Thomas who came to India in 52 A.D. Even after two centuries, Christians are only 2 1/2% of India's population. But we survived as a minority in spite of many persecutions. On my mother's side, I am the fourth generation clergy. Growing up as a teenager, I resented the fact that my parents dedicated me for God's work without my knowledge. I grew up in a community with Hindus and Muslims as good neighbors. And yet intermarriage or learning about the other faith was not the norm. We just accepted our neighbors and did not bother to evangelize them. Things have changed after the missionaries came from 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

After graduation from college, I worked through the YMCA with Tibetan Refugees. They were placed in some of the most remote parts of India. This was a very challenging experience as well as very fulfilling. I was providing a service that no one else was giving, such as teaching English and recreation after a hard day's work. The camp authorities became very suspicious about my work as they thought I was a missionary in disguise. One evening when I came to my hut, it was double-locked by someone else. The camp doctor who was a friend of mine advised me to get out of the camp that very night. The only problem was that the nearest bus station was 35 miles away from the camp. With the help of a local guide, I walked all night through some of the most dangerous jungle to save myself from serious trouble and death.

It was a life-changing moment for me. I felt my life was spared for a purpose. I was sent to a much safer camp. It was at this time I met my wife Leela, a high school teacher, who also came from a family full of clergy. We got married in 1967.

My next call was to work with the Student Christian Movement of India. SCM of India was the student arm of the WCC. In this capacity, I traveled to many parts of India and Asia. I was able to study in Japan one summer to learn about the struggles of Christian students as minorities. We often traveled with a group of students to some of the most remote villages in India digging wells and supplying the basic needs in drought-stricken areas. In the meantime, we also had three children, a boy and two girls. Since I had a traveling job, Leela and our parents had to take care of the children.

Towards the end of the ministry with SCM, I had the good fortune to meet Dr. Eugene Carson Blake who came to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Church of South India. With his help, I was able to come to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 1973 at the age of 33. I left my wife and three small children back home and arrived in New York with eight dollars. I cried all the way, asking myself if I was doing the right thing. I did not enter the seminary to become an ordained minister. As a lay person, I was very critical of the church because I thought the church did not walk the talk. Deep down I was rebelling against my parents' wish to see me as an ordained minister.

#### How I was Broken and Blessed

After completing a master's degree in Social Work from the University of Pittsburgh, and towards the end of my seminary education, I got a chance to go to the USSR to study about the Russian Orthodox Spirituality and how they survived 60 years of persecution. Prof. Bruce Rigdon was our leader. When the program was over, I asked Dr. Rigdon permission to break my journey in London to visit some of my cousins and he agreed. I stayed in London for a week. When I came back to continue my journey, I was not allowed to travel back to USA, as my yearly VISA was about to expire. In a split second I became an Illegal Alien. Finally after a day of interrogation they called my cousin with whom I was staying. From then on, it was his responsibility for my stay in UK, till I worked out my immigration woes. If that happened today, I would be in a jail in London. It took a week to work things out. I literally felt like Jonah in the belly of a whale. One night I realized I was running away from God and the time had come for me to say yes to God. And I did. From there it was a long road to become a Presbyterian minister. And here I am after 30 years of ministry to witness to you how I was taken, broken, blessed and given in so many times in so many ways. This is only the tip of the iceberg. But the amazing thing about life is, it is when you are broken that you go deep enough to find out who you are. One could go the other way too. You can become bitter and forget your identity and your call and your praxis.

#### I Was Given—Practicing My Call

Some one asked me, if you had only one sermon left what would it be? For me it would be unity and peace. We live in a complicated world. Religious fanaticism is on the rise. People will go to any length to make their point and belief. To find unity and peace is even a more difficult task. But that is our call. The world has killed the best peacemakers, including our Lord. Jesus' last prayer in John 17 was that they all may be one as God and Jesus are one, so the world may believe that God has sent Jesus. 2 Cor: 5 declares, "...in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." Eph 4: 3 and 4 reminds us to make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one salvation. The book of confession undergirds this belief. It

is a fundamental conviction that, in Jesus Christ, the church is already one. Both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed name unity and universality as marks of Christ's Church. The second Helvetic confession argues that there is only one church for all times. Both the Confessions of 67 and the Brief Statement of Faith affirm the same belief.

It is clear from these and other references in the confessions that the unity of the Church is God's doing, a gift of God in Jesus Christ. It can neither be created nor destroyed by our efforts. Our divisions, though they may obscure our unity, cannot destroy it. When we come together at the Lord's Table, we are seeking to make visible what by the Grace of God is already the case. It is only when we are one in Christ and break bread with all God's people that we acknowledge the presence of Christ. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for our Christian witness is our division. St. Paul put it this way. Is Christ divided? This unity in Christ does not mean uniformity, but unity in purpose and unity in service. Doctrine divides, service unites.

All my life I was searching for home. The person I decided to follow was homeless. All he said was "come and see" and I did. Even though I did not bring any material things to this country 35 years ago, I did bring my own baggage. Some good, but mostly my own ignorance. But it is in the Presbyterian Church that I found a home. This church taught me there is always more to learn, more to love, more to forgive. With all our imperfections we try hard to listen. We never claim we are a perfect church or that we are the only church. Increasingly we are living in a shrinking world. If we do not learn how to get along with those with whom we disagree and who are different, what are we teaching our children? A Rabbi was once asked, "When will the war be over," when will we see peace? He answered, "When we love our children more than we hate our enemies." Thank you for giving me a home. Thanks for the privilege of serving our Lord together, in a small way.

Thanks are to God. Oommen K. Thomas.