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Introduction

“Where are you from?” Korean North Americans are asked this question often when they first meet people from the dominant culture in the United States.¹ The question carries political, sociological, and cultural implications. But on hearing it, what it seems to imply or what the speaker seems to insinuate is, “You are not an American. You don’t belong here. When do you think you will go back to your original country?” Thus, the question both reflects and sustains the highly racialized idea of Korean Americans as “perpetual strangers.”² This racialized view of Korean Americans also reveals the dominant culture’s hegemony, prejudice, and unjust dealing based on skin pigmentation that considers them always “others” and not equal human beings.

In response, it is imperative that prophetic preaching arise among Korean American Christians. This preaching focus can help Korean Americans combat the impact of the racial supremacist doctrines and unjust cultural practices of US society and eventually work toward the society’s transformation through the good news of the gospel. The good news of the gospel always seeks racial reconciliation, cultural harmony, and social equality, which Korean Americans hope and pray to achieve in their lives in the wider culture of the U.S.

This writing introduces key characteristics of prophetic preaching from the Korean American perspective, given their unique life experience and justice issues. This work will be important in many ways since in numerous places the Korean American pulpit has often been criticized for being too oblivious to the dominant culture’s hegemony and too individualistic and other-worldly due to its highly evangelical, mission-oriented stance. Notwithstanding the criticism, the Korean American faith life and pulpit have shown highly positive potential for prophetic proclamation. This work is a faithful attempt to bring that potential to the light and encourage the practice of prophetic preaching in the Korean American pulpit and beyond.

Unique Life Experience: A Theological Analysis

Sang Hyun Lee, a prominent Korean American theologian who taught at Princeton Theological Seminary until his retirement, provides a theological analysis of the Korean American life experience that can serve as a foundation for a prophetic message from the pulpit. Lee realizes that Korean Americans live in a “liminal space.”³ No longer Korean and not yet American, Korean Americans live somewhere between the two different cultural identities. This liminality can lead to three invaluable advantages: (1) openness to the new or hidden potentials of society, (2) the emergence of *communitas*, and (3) prophetic knowledge and subversive action.⁴ Korean

Americans are wide open to new ideas or forms of society as they live in the unstructured, open-ended space. *Communitas* is a radical or progressive community in which strangers and immigrants are welcome, different races in conflict are reconciled, religions that are at odds with each other seek harmony and common ground, and different sexes and genders look for mutual understanding. *Communitas* is one of the new forms possible in the liminal or “third space.”⁵ Last, if necessary, subversive actions (e.g., nonviolent street protest or censorious film) can be performed based on unique prophetic knowledge and spirit gained in the liminal space.

Lee finds that the Christian faith, specifically the life of Jesus, is at the center of the Korean American liminal consciousness. For him, Jesus himself is a prime figure of liminal life. Having heaven as his original place (as he declares himself to be the Son of God), Jesus never fully belongs to the earthly life. Rather, with new ideas about religion and society, Jesus shakes religious conventions, societal norms, and individual ethics that do not serve the divine-sanctioned humanity. With new prophetic knowledge from above, yet not fully belonging either to heaven or this world (or belonging to both), the earthly Jesus is free to proclaim the urgency of *communitas* and take subversive actions as needed. Korean Americans can see this earthly, progressive Jesus as the prototype of their liminal life or life lived in the wilderness.⁶ Saying that Jesus did not belong to either heaven or this world is meant in a Johannine socio-spiritual sense: “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”⁷ He was in the world in his full humanity (like Korean Americans living in the U.S. physically), yet he didn’t really belong to it as the world didn’t accept him. With this Jesus in mind and through the power of the Spirit, Korean Americans can maintain their hope that *communitas* can be achieved here on earth.

Lee does not romanticize, however, the liminal life of Korean Americans. Marginality or marginalization (or discrimination) is the continued, visible mark on the backs of Korean Americans. The dominant culture still categorizes them as strange immigrants, if not potential criminals, just as the dominant culture of Jesus’ own time marginalized and persecuted him in a similar way. Even worse, Korean Americans have become the target of severe economic and political exploitation, along with other minority groups. Thus, it is no wonder that we see social retreat among Korean Americans into their isolated cultural silos due to heavy intimidation caused by marginalization and discrimination.⁸ They have found just enough peace and comfort to survive in the cultural ghetto they inhabit, yet have lost the potential and spirit to transform their unjust reality.

The whole situation delineated here brings to light the necessity and importance of the prophetic message and action to be taken by and for Korean Americans. This is not only for the sake of their own life in the liminal place, but more significantly for that of the wider society—specifically toward the transformation of the latter. The Korean American church, and in particular its pulpit, can play a profound role in this endeavor as a majority of the two million Korean Americans attend church regularly, and preaching is considered the most important liturgical event of their worship.⁹ The message from the pulpit could be the beginning of the grand social change that Korean Americans dream of experiencing in their new pilgrim location.

The Pilgrim’s Life and the Emergence of the Prophetic Voice

Lee acknowledges the pilgrim image as the key metaphor for Korean life in the American “wilderness.”¹⁰ Specifically, he observes that many Koreans have adopted the Abrahamic wilderness story (Gen. 12) as their own ontological narrative ground in a typological sense. That is, like Abraham and his family, Koreans have been called to leave their original land for an unknown land with a higher purpose and promise—to be like Abraham, a blessing for all nations. Still, even with this supreme promise in their hearts, Koreans know that they now live in the wilderness as pilgrims. It is a wilderness because they are marginalized and discriminated against on a daily basis. Yet as pilgrims on the journey, they know the current oppressive reality does not

have the final word. Rather, they acknowledge the ultimate future that awaits them. This hope surely helps them press on in their uneasy yet hopeful pilgrim journey.

Koreans find in Jesus the pilgrim par excellence.¹¹ Jesus left his heavenly home to come to earth and live as a stranger, even amongst his own people. After his time on earth was completed, he returned to his seat at the right hand of God and was glorified. When the narrative is recounted in this way, the focus falls on Jesus' earthly life seen as the ultimate spiritual journey for all of humanity to get to the place where God is the eternal host. However, this does not mean that the sole focus of Jesus was on heavenly or other-worldly matters. His spiritual mind is [able to be] oriented to the heavenly realm, because his primary concerns are fixed on earth. Jesus knows of problems such as the sins of individual humans, human suffering, and social injustice. But he also knows that those problems do not have the final word. Jesus proclaims that God has the final word over every aspect of human life. Jesus gives hope that the final word will be fulfilled on the last day. Until then, we humans must live into the hope and live as purposeful pilgrims who carry on what Jesus proclaimed as a fellow pilgrim. Through this mindset and lifestyle Jesus attaches an ethical or prophetic dimension to the concept of the pilgrim in the minds of Koreans.

It should be noted that the Korean pilgrim journey, or the ultimate reality they walk toward in imitation of Jesus the Pilgrim, is two-fold in character. First, their pilgrimage is other-worldly; that is, the eventual promised land is not here on earth, and it is not even possible nor do they expect to taste the fullness of the promised land in this life. Second, their pilgrim life is nonetheless, also this-worldly. To begin with, they are pilgrims, not ascetics. They eat, have shelters (or homes), do business, and participate in politics by voting. Simply put, they are *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Living in this world, they can provide their own prophetic voice from the perspective of the coming promised land. Their pilgrim spirituality can strip the neo-capitalistic dominant culture of its false promises of wealth (for everyone who works hard) and its explicit and implicit marginalization and discrimination based on skin color.

This dual prophetic dimension of the pilgrim life aligns well with what is demonstrated in The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. King realizes that the full achievement of what he is dreaming will be impossible here on earth. But, he knows that, thanks to that prophetic dream, he and the faithful together have the courage, will, and power to deconstruct and transform the current dominant culture. For that reason, this sermon excerpt from The Rev. Dr. Eunjoo Mary Kim does not sound strange to the ears of Korean Americans.

We're pilgrims called by God
to continue struggling
until the day when all immigrant people,
not only Koreans, but also other ethnic groups,
fully belong to this new land
and equally inherit this promised land of God.¹²

She realizes that Koreans as pilgrims will only get into the God-prepared promised land on the day of the eschaton. But still, their endeavor to taste and establish the foreshadowing of the other-worldly promised land continues here and now on earth.

Overall, the pilgrim metaphor is a very positive teleological interpretation of the Korean American life of faith. The metaphor transforms sociologically imposed identities of Korean Americans, such as "perpetual strangers," "second class citizens," "unfortunate immigrants," "model minorities," and "potential criminals," into much more constructive identities as beloved children of God, faithful pilgrims, rigorous missionaries, visionary prophets, and blessing-sharers for all nations as shown on the following chart.¹³

Discriminatory labels	Pilgrim-identity labels
Perpetual strangers	Beloved children of God
Second class Americans	Faithful pilgrims
Unfortunate immigrants	Rigorous missionaries
Model minorities	Visionary prophets
Potential criminals	Blessing-sharers for all nations

Most importantly, by re-naming Korean Americans according to their true identity in God's eyes as pilgrims on a journey, the wilderness of American society is transformed from a place of despair, conflict, or mere survival into a place of mission, blessing, and reconciliation. With this new pilgrim identity, then, a prophetic voice at the pulpit is both possible and necessary and is a special calling for Korean American preachers and all Koreans.

Justice and Reconciliatory Themes

In that context, several justice and reconciliatory themes can be discussed for and from the Korean American pulpit. However, two themes seem most appropriate and vital: racial equality and religious diversity.

Racial Equality: Walking Together as Pilgrims

God called Abraham and said to him that all tribes of the world would be blessed by him. God's blessings would flow through him. Friends, that was a purposeful calling of God for Abraham! ... In 2010 how are we going to live? We are called to serve and share as well. When we serve and share, God's blessings will get richer and more bountiful for us and around us. We are the blessed reservoir and gateway through which God's blessings will flow abundantly. So, go out, give away, and take care of your neighbors. Be blessings for the world.¹⁴

This sermon excerpt is not only for the Korean pews, but for those of the dominant culture as well. In most Korean American churches, a full rice meal is served every Sunday throughout the year. Church members, taking turns, gather on Saturday to prepare a nice meal. Sometimes, they spend a whole week thinking how they could make an excellent meal the following Sunday (of course, this is not a food competition!). They are eager to bring the best meal experience for all who attend the church service. It should be noted that this meal is free—totally free—for all. Even a tiny amount of donation is not required or expected. It is free for current church membership, visitors, and even for the homeless who come for a nice meal for the day. There are no racial divides, no gender or sex divisions, no social status separations, no immigrant status splits, and no economic status breakups. All sit around the same table(s), eat the same food together, and celebrate the pilgrim life together in Christ.

This "ricing community" is possible among Korean Americans because they recognize each other as fellow pilgrims walking together in this land.¹⁵ Beyond or regardless of all potentially dividing factors (race, gender and sex, social and immigrant status, and economic hierarchy), in this community, all become pilgrims walking toward the promised land.

What is missing in this faithful community and around the meal table is the settler's mindset that is deeply rooted in the dominant culture. The dominant culture's settlers, who have occupied the land for generations, tend to profess that this land *is* the promised land as expressed succinctly in the civil-religious phrase, "God Bless America," and they desire to protect the land from outsiders. But, what is ignored in their patriotic, racial discrimination is that they were all—literally, all their European ancestors—at one time strangers and pilgrims to this land. As history records, those pilgrims were welcomed by Native Americans and given food as they were desperately trying to survive and thrive in this foreign land. Now, the Korean church through its prophetic presence and message as the "ricing community," challenges and encourages the forgetting

settlers 1) to remember their humble origins and the responsibility to share their blessings with others, and 2) to walk together with those from other cultures and races as fellow pilgrims.¹⁶

Living Harmoniously: Toward the Multi-Religious Pulpit

Surprisingly (to the West), Koreans living in South Korea celebrate with zero conflict the birthdays of two prominent religious leaders as national holidays: Buddha and Jesus. To reiterate, there is no conflict. Religious people on each side give their full respect to the nationally recognized birthday of each religious figure. Of course, when Christianity began spreading in Korea a couple of centuries ago, the situation was different. Back then, conflict and mistrust were the norm. Over time, however, the two major religions in Korea, along with Confucianism, have learned to live together with reverence, humility, and tolerance.

And beyond that, each has learned to integrate constructive religious insights from the others into their teachings and practices. For instance, Korean Christianity has easily adopted Buddhism's teaching on compassionate sacrifice which eventually helped Koreans accept the Christian concepts of incarnation and the sacrificial love of Christ. Also, "the Buddhist disciplines of prayer, meditation, and the practice of love through charity" have become essential disciplines in the church.¹⁷ Further, Buddhism's pursuit of the "integral unity of emotion and cognition" has played a key role in Koreans' faith formation, especially in preaching.¹⁸ This is a small example of interreligious interaction between Korean Christianity and Buddhism.¹⁹ Other instances can also be found regarding Christianity's interaction with Confucianism and Shamanism.²⁰

The Korean American pulpit could be one of those places that North American religious folks turn to for a lesson in multi-religious or inter-religious harmony, discourse, and collaboration. The Korean American pulpit knows how to respect other religions and creatively integrate the best of them into the sermonic message. What is fascinating about the Korean American pulpit in this regard is that the multi-religious integration is subtle yet sharp-witted. The pulpit does not necessarily speak about other religions, but the integrative presence in the message is strong enough, as this example demonstrates:

How do you think of God? The father? The best analogical understanding of God is God being both the father and mother. The Bible speaks of God as the father only. But, that is not a perfect understanding of God. God plays not only the father's role, but also the mother's role. Is there a child who does not have a mother? Even though we do not use the term, "God the mother," I believe, God plays both roles of the parents together. God is the perfect parent(s). ... It is hard to live as a Korean [immigrant] woman [in the church]. We men should support them in many ways, so that women can accomplish their callings and visions in faith.²¹

What is clearly present in the excerpt but not explicitly stated is the Confucian ideology and ethos—specifically, an egalitarian interpretation of Confucian fatherhood.²² In any Confucian-oriented Korean congregational context, which is normal, this message may sound a bit provocative, yet the biblical reconstruction of God's parenthood keeps the tension abated and even sublimates it into a genuine Christian vision for the divine-sanctioned husband-wife relationship. In that sense, this sermon makes commendable collaborative use of two distinct religions, which could contribute to multi-religious harmony not only inside the church walls but far beyond in general society.²³

Conclusion

Critical and genuine voices from the social margins always convey the potential to be prophetic. The Korean American pulpit is no exception. Korean Americans have something to say that could make this world (i.e., the U.S. and beyond) a better place to live in. And this something is capable of being fully shared with people from other margins and even with those from the

dominant culture, as long as the latter is willing to accept the challenging yet transformative message. Specifically, the Korean pulpit as prophetic can encourage the dominant culture to remember its original pilgrim identity and to be more open to multi-religious social configurations, facilitate better collaboration, and thereby create *communitas* among various communities in this nation by inviting and including those who are considered “others.”

Notes on Contributor

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Notes

1. By Korean North Americans, I specifically mean the first-generation Koreans living in the United States. First generation generally indicates Koreans who came to the U.S. as adults and have settled as either permanent residents or naturalized citizens. Sociologists of religion have long found that second-generation Koreans, who are born and raised by the first-generation Koreans, have developed their own spiritual and theological voices even though there is some critical overlap between the two generations in terms of theology and spirituality. See Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2010), esp. chap. 2.
2. *Perpetual stranger* or *perpetual foreigner* are common sociological terms appearing in many different types of literature and media that denote the historical and current marginal status of Asian Americans collectively, including Korean Americans. See Mary Fong and Rueyling Chuang, *Communicating Ethnic and Cultural Identity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 347–348.
3. Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
4. Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 5–10.
5. The third space, originally coined by cultural critic Homi K. Bhabha, is a metaphor for the Christian church’s work by which the social or religious status quo is deconstructed and a new communal hope and reality is implanted. This third space work is not of a “once-and-for-all” nature but should be continually renewed. See Kwok Pui Lan, “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts,” *Homiletic* 40, no. 1 (2015): 9–10; Christopher Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 16; Homi K. Bhabha, “Frontlines/Borderposts,” in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelica Bammer (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994), 269–272.
6. Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 38–46.
7. John 1:10–11 (NRSV).
8. Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 13–15.
9. Regarding the prominent position of preaching in Korean worship, Jung Young Lee writes: “In fact, preaching is more than merely a part of the worship service; it is, in fact, a worship service. Every act of worship can be regarded as preaching. Prayers, music, hymn singing, reading scriptures, the citation of creeds, and the attitude of a congregation are all forms of preaching. Each action conveys the Word of God in its own form and style.” Jung Young Lee, *Korean Preaching: An Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 41.
10. Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 63–87.
11. Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700–1500* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 14, calls Jesus as described in the Gospel of John, a “pilgrim-stranger” who “voluntarily entered the world of exile in order to bring about reconciliation between mankind [sic] and God.” For Wayne A. Meeks, “Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 1 (1972): 44–72, Jesus is “the Stranger par excellence,” which in Dyas’ perception of Jesus, can be easily translated as the pilgrim.
12. Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), 158.
13. Quotation marks are used here with no specific references as these terms are common phrases appearing in many sources of public media and literature. See n. 2.
14. Rev. Seuk Chan Goh, “Let Your Blessings Flow” (sermon on Genesis 12:1–3, 1 Jan. 2012, my translation), http://www.sarang.com/srtv_sermon/550/?lan=ko&page=7&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&list_style=webzine&clicked=1&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc.
15. Su Yon Pak, *Singing the Lord’s Song in a New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 91.

16. Exodus 22, Deuteronomy 24, and other passages share the same motif of remembering oneself as strangers and pilgrims in a foreign land. God encourages the Israelites to be hospitable to foreigners and strangers among them by remembering their own past. John McClure's homiletic strategy of *mimetic form of anamnesis* can be a help here regarding the use of the scripture in preaching. This strategy "promotes sacred remembrance as a form of imitation." The Korean American pulpit can encourage listeners to imitate the sacred message and related action found in the scripture around the topics of pilgrimage and hospitality. See John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 23.
17. Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God*, 26.
18. J. Lee, *Korean Preaching*, 47.
19. Scholars like Il Kwon Jeong have pointed out that Christianity had influenced Buddhist practices, too. A prominent impact is Buddhism's more pastoral approach to people's daily, immediate life concerns. Thus, the monks have become more relationally involved rather than traditionally didactic and detached in their religious communication and teaching. A concrete example is the emergence of the modern Buddhist marriage ceremony, which traditional Buddhism had little or no interest in. Generally, Buddhism considers marriage a civic affair (not a religious duty or sacrament) while a newlywed Buddhist couple can receive a blessing from the monk. Il Kwon Jeong, *Buddha and Scapegoat: Rene Girard and the Origin of Buddhist Culture* (Seoul: SFC, 2013), 310–311.
20. See Sunggu Yang, *Evangelical Pilgrims from the East: Faith Fundamentals of Korean American Protestant Diasporas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2016), chaps. 4 and 5.
21. Rev. Dong Won Kim, "Becoming the Mother of Faith" (sermon on Exod. 20, Grace Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, CA, 5 Dec. 2013, my translation), http://kimdongwon.net/index.php?mid=sermon2&comment_srl=11255&page=12&document_srl=49272.
22. Conventional Confucianism establishes five relationships as the universal foundation for human civilization: ruler to subject, father to son, husband to wife, elder to younger, and friend to friend. In all these five relationships, except for the last one, the latter is always subordinate to the former, which keeps the human society orderly.
23. James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 129–132, emphasizes preaching's "catalytic role" in creating the multi-religious dialogue and harmony in a multi-cultural congregational community where people with diverse religious backgrounds attempt to reconcile the distinctiveness of Christian faith and belief systems of other religions. Nieman and Rogers notice, through interviews with local pastors, that the pulpit could be used as a place and time for catalyzing critical dialogues among religions.