

America the question

The nation is always at its best when we eschew certainty.

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“Haven’t you noticed that the national anthem ends on a question?”

Professor Bratt in American Intellectual History my senior year of college pointed that out to me. I was so stunned that I had to go back and check. He was right. Our national anthem does end on a question.

What kind of country ends its national anthem not on bold declaration, but with a question mark?

It fits though, America is always at its best when we are a question and not a certainty. It all began with a question after the constitutional convention. Benjamin Franklin, in response to someone asking what the new government of the country was, is supposed to have said, “A republic, madame, if you can keep it.”

There is a question in there. Can we keep it?

And at the Gettysburg address Lincoln flatly states that the war is a test, a question, about whether “any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

And Dr. King was bending the moral arc of history to his will when, calling for justice, he stood on the steps of Lincoln Memorial and asked the question whether this nation had really lived up to its ideals of liberty and equality.

We are at our best, as a nation, when we remain a question. For questions can change and adapt. When America is a question we can remain faithful to founding principles and at the same ask how they can be made real in this present age.

We are at our worst when we abandon the question and make America a certainty. Our greatest idolatry and sin happens when we change the faithful doubt of the question mark into the prideful certainty of a period.

So certain that we are blessed and others are not. So certain that some races are better than others. So certain that there is not enough to go around and so what little help there is must be taken from others. So certain that all things must be earned. So certain, as the fourth verse of the national anthem goes, that “conquer we must, when our cause it is just, And this be our motto— In God is our trust.”

We have done truly awful things in the name of that certainty.

My prayer is that we remember America the question. That if we are the home of the brave then we be brave enough to ask the questions. Questions about liberty and equality and justice. Questions about how we, as a society, want to be in faithful relationship with our brothers and sisters. Questions about how we are to care for the poor.

For we are at best when we abandon the idol that is certainty and lean into the question.

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