

Heavenly Citizenship

Philippians 3:17-4:1

November 8, 2020

Read Philippians 3:17-4:1

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

Today seems to be a good day to talk about citizenship. Specifically, citizenship as it pertains to who we are in Christ and how that reality impacts how we live in the world into which we have been sent.

Citizenship is a topic that is on our minds today. As the dust begins to settle on the election, the voices calling for healing and “uniting” the country are growing. Whether that is fluffy rhetoric or a genuine desire remains to be seen. With how close the votes were and the polarized positions those votes represented, there are real questions about whether the people of this country can or – perhaps more importantly – are willing to transcend differences in order to come together. I pray we will.

Prior to the election we heard quite a bit about our civic duty as citizens to get out and vote. We responded. There were more votes cast in this election than any other in our nation’s history; the percentage vote by eligible voters was the highest since 1900.¹

Our verses in Philippians today talk about citizenship. I want to spend some time reflecting on this idea. As many of you may recall, prior to serving here we lived and served a congregation in Chula Vista, California. Chula Vista is located in south San Diego. At night, we looked at the lights of Tijuana from our back yard. Literally. We had a front row seat for those seeking citizenship through the immigration process. We certainly saw our fair share of illegal immigration and the issues that causes, too; but I want to narrow my thoughts here to the things I witnessed with those who made the effort to pursue citizenship through the process we have in place.

Most (if not all) of us here have our American citizenship as a result of our birth. We were born in the United States or born to American parents, so our citizenship and our belonging here was automatic. That is true for me. Thus, I never really thought about it – aside from the election season and jury duty – until we lived in Chula Vista. It was like seeing live and in-person what I had only known through grainy black-and-white newsreel clips of the ships filled with teeming masses steaming past the Statue of Liberty on the way to Battery Park and Ellis Island. Do not get me wrong: I have a special place in my heart for Memorial Day, the 4th of July, and Veterans Day (which is coming up this Wednesday). I count it a tremendous blessing to be able to pray for and give thanks to God for those who sacrifice and have sacrificed in order for me to enjoy the opportunities and privileges I have received. But I have to confess that my sentiments on those days tend to be more grateful patriotism than any kind of deep thoughts about the meaning and significance of

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/04/2020-election-sees-record-high-turnout-with-at-least-159point8-million-votes-projected.html>

being a citizen. It was not until I walked alongside people taking the steps to gain citizenship did I realize how much it costs and how valuable it is.

The citizenship process is not easy. It takes a long time. Navigating it can be very difficult because the steps can change mid-course. You can take a step forward and then get knocked back two or three. Hiring an attorney to guide you through the various administrative requirements is costly. The quickest I knew anyone make it from application to the granting of citizenship was about 18 months. The more common time-frame was five to seven years.

It is well known in the community of those seeking citizenship that the process is daunting. One of the reasons why people wait to make the first step is because it is terrifying. The unknowns are overwhelming. You have no control. You have to hope you are deemed worthy. The questions weigh heavily: Will you get lost in the system? Spaces are limited; is there room for you? Will you encounter someone who is not sympathetic to your cause? Will you even understand what is required? Even if you are conversational in English, many of those forms read like the End User Agreement for the software of your computer. How much do you read and understand before you click that “Agree” button? Do you know what you agreed? Imagine then trying to fill out forms where you are struggling to understand the importance of the words being used and your future is at stake.

Yet people face those fears and take the steps because the hope – the *hope* – of gaining citizenship means that much to them. The dream of being an American citizen is a driving aspiration that people hold as they persevere through month after month of silence, waiting, wondering and insecurity. The sacrifices and struggles are worth it when they think of the life they can begin to pursue and – more so – the life that their children and grandchildren might be able to have. Each step completed successfully is greeted with celebration and cautious optimism. Then the realities of the next hurdles takes them back to the silence, waiting, wondering, and insecurity. Nothing they do can speed the process; there is much they can do that will kill it.

During the decade-plus we served in Chula Vista, I had three occasions to celebrate the granting of citizenship. Each was as jubilant as a World Series victory. Each individual was as relieved as the marathon runner crossing the finish line. Each was as hopeful about the future as they were nervous in the past waiting. Why?

Being an American matters. Being an American means you have access to unprecedented opportunity. You have the opportunity to go after the American dream: the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Being an American means you are in a country where the majority may rule, but the minority’s rights are protected and their voices are heard. It may not be automatic and it may not be easy, but the system here is tangibly and overtly different than systems around the world – different enough that people want to come here, people flee to get here, in order to be a part of what is this grand experiment. It is the best the world has to offer.

So what does this have to do with Philippians?

Let me put it this way: the way applicants long for the things American citizenship offers, so much greater are the ways we long for realizing the hope of citizenship in God’s heavenly kingdom. The

sacrifices, the struggle, and the leaving behind of *what was* are all worth it because of the promises of *what awaits*.

In this letter to his friends in Philippi Paul was writing to update them, to thank them, and to encourage them to continue on in the gospel that they had heard and received from him. Then he began to write about the challenges and opposition they would face. Specifically, he was urging them to be discerning about those who would require them to do anything in addition to receiving Jesus Christ – the chief example being circumcision as a requirement or litmus test of loyalty.

To Paul, seeking to impose Jewish law, customs, and practices would be like requiring new American citizens to maintain the drivers licenses from their countries of origin, to pay taxes to those countries, and to swear allegiance – all contrary to the oath they took when becoming American citizens. None of those things are valuable for their hard-won status as Americans.

If you remember the verses that we covered last week, Paul recounted his pedigree:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

In short Paul's status as a Jew was impeccable. His birth, his education, his training, his career path, the recognition he had received and his reputation all were examples of Jewish litmus tests he would have passed and treasured – until – until he encountered the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ. Do you remember what Paul wrote immediately after giving his resume? "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." Loss. "I regard them as rubbish." Rubbish – or, as we talked about last week, rubbish was a polite way of translating what is more accurately intended as excrement or dung. Christ is so much greater than anything the world has to offer.

Our verses this week begin, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us." Taken as a starting point, out of context, or on its own, that is a remarkable statement of hubris. We bristle when someone says something like that: Dude, seriously? How great an opinion of yourself do *you* have? You hypocrite, you are just like those you are warning us to beware!

However, taken in context, Paul was saying something very different. He was reminding his friends of the riches of discipleship in Jesus. Paul was saying, "Imitate me in not valuing the things that have no lasting value; imitate me in treasuring the very treasure of 'the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.'" Imitate my focus *on Christ*. Imitate my passion *for Christ*. Imitate the hope I have found *in Christ* – and in Christ *alone*.

Paul was contrasting the hope he had with plight the enemies of Christ. He used some interesting phrasing here, "I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears." Why would Paul grieve over those who were enemies of the cross? Paul told of them with tears because they were people like he was prior to his Damascus Road experience. They were people who were confident

in their pedigree, confident in their conformity to the law, confident in their ability to sit in judgment of others, confident in their zeal to conform the revelation of Christ to what existed prior to Christ. Whether Paul was thinking of specific individuals he had described to the Philippians during his time there, or whether he was thinking of the kinds of individuals he had encountered on his journeys, or people with whom he had grown up, Paul recognized in them the destructive path they were pursuing. In Romans 9, he wrote,

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

In other words, Paul was anguished by those who were rejecting Christ while simultaneously holding onto the very things that pointed to Christ. They were proud – relying on their pedigree and faithfulness to the requirements of the covenant law that Christ had fulfilled; while ignoring and rejecting the surpassing sufficiency of the new covenant the Christ instituted and effected. In other words, those seeking to make good Jews out of new Christians were most sincerely and passionately seeking to draw them to a worldly citizenship of futility, desperation, and hopelessness.

So when Paul wrote, “join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us,” he was exhorting them to hold onto the assured hope of salvation and eternal life that comes with receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior. “Their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven.”

So what are the implications if “our citizenship is in heaven”?

Well, first, it means that Christians are foreigners living in a foreign land. Yes, we hold a kind of dual citizenship, but our primary and priority citizenship is as servants of the king of the kingdom of heaven. The Philippians understood this tension because they were a part of the Roman empire, too. Proclaiming Jesus is Lord was contrary to the civic requirement of loyalty to Caesar.

The same tension exists for us. We can and should participate in our civic responsibilities of this nation, but we cannot mistake those as being identical with our responsibilities as disciples of Jesus. Yes, we can debate and we can engage and we can disagree and we can argue about what is best for this country – and, yes, we can and should vote. However, we cannot conflate and mistake the government of the United States of America with the Kingdom of Heaven.

Elsewhere, Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone,² for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.” So, we pray for our elected officials – in seasons when they are to our liking and in seasons when they are not to

our liking. We pray they serve in ways pleasing in God's sight. We pray they act so we can live with "all godliness and dignity."

Because our citizenship is in heaven, it means we are heaven's representatives sent here. We are Christ's ambassadors. That is true in ***whatever are our circumstances***. We are the tangible reflection of Christ. We have been sent *by* Christ, "Go"; *for* Christ, "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded." That is true in ***whatever are our circumstances***. Paul was incarcerated in an earthly prison, yet was undeterred from pursuing his calling to bear witness as a redeemed and free citizen of heaven. From prison, he wrote them, "Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain."

Second, "our citizenship is in heaven" means that our citizenship has been granted. This was not a future promise, it was a current declaration. Our citizenship has been granted. Our citizenship *is* in heaven. Now. Not after I die, but my citizenship in heaven is now.

I grew up in a Christian family and so I never really thought about it. From the earliest time I remember being taught about Jesus, it was with the understanding that having Jesus meant I would go to heaven when I die. "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord, my soul to keep . If I should die before I wake, I pray, my soul, the LORD to take." When I was convicted and professed Jesus as my Savior and Lord, I knew that I was heaven-bound. Yet, my current status was not something I really considered.

Or, more truthfully, for a long time, calling myself a Christian did not stop my doubts about belonging to heaven now. I shared all the fears and concerns I hear from others: the unknowns are overwhelming. You have no control. Sometimes things seem like they are taking too long. Sometimes it seems like things have gone wrong. You wonder if there is room for you in heaven. You have to hope you are deemed worthy. The questions weigh heavily: Will I get lost in the system? Will God know my name? Will God be sympathetic to my cause? Do I even understand what is required?

I do not think I am alone. My sense is that there are many who think of salvation as something primarily related to what happens after death. Even long-time Christians wrestle with these questions of belonging. Going to church and worshiping and trying to be a good Christian are good things we know we are supposed to do in gratitude and response to the promise of salvation we have received.

However, it seems to be a new notion that we are now – already – citizens of the kingdom of heaven and representatives of it sent to bear witness. Yet notice: Paul confirmed it. He was writing to those who professed Jesus as Lord and Savior. "Our citizenship *is* in heaven." Receive that affirmation. Receive that confirmation. Receive the peace that comes from knowing that you *have been* adopted, you *have been* made part of the family, you *have been* made Christ's own.

“But, I did not earn it.” No, you did not. No, you could not. To you it has been given by the one who did earn it. It was tough. It was painful. It involved sacrifice, struggle, and suffering. It involved obedience to the Father in heaven in conflict with the powers of this world. Jesus did it. And because Jesus did it, “God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

It was not until I walked alongside Jesus taking the steps to gain my citizenship did I realize how much it costs and how valuable it is.

The way applicants long for the things American citizenship offers, so much greater are the ways we await the full realization of what is citizenship in God’s heavenly kingdom. The sacrifices, the struggle, and the leaving behind of *what was* are all worth it because of the promises of *what awaits*.

“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.”

Amen.

Prayer

Hymn: Living for Jesus

Questions:

1. Where is your citizenship? How do you see the answer to that question shaping or framing how you make decisions in your day to day life?
2. What comfort do you have knowing your citizenship is in heaven? How does it answer the doubts and concerns that arise in difficult times?
3. What aspects of your life would you encourage your friends, neighbors, and/or family to imitate?