

“Knowing Where Your Citizenship Is and to Whom You Belong”

+ Lent 2 – Year C +

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35

February 28, 2010

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day particularly the letter to the Philippians where we read, “our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ..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.”

It always seems uncharacteristic to read Paul’s words to the Philippians – those people whom he “loves and longs for...” This is, after all, Paul who takes a most unkind verbal swipe at the Circumcision Party in Galatia telling them he hopes the knife slips in carrying out that which they demand. Apparently his animus toward those who disagree with him subsides when he writes to these followers in Philippi looking at the whole picture of their faith life – the chaos that surrounds them and what they face as God’s people each day. Considering them from afar Paul reminds them they are loved and admonishes them to “stand firm.”

Their challenge was not unlike ours. They lived in the midst of people whose hearts were not turned toward the one true God – toward Jesus Christ – people consumed with their own wants and desires. Paul describes them as people whose “god is their belly.” (a quote that has always been a little too close for comfort). Like Jesus who longs to gather the scattered and proud of Jerusalem who are facing a slaughter they cannot see Paul wants these believers whom he carries in his heart – God wants us to know today that we are dearly loved – God’s “joy and crown.”

With earthquakes destroying the lives of millions in Haiti and Chile, wars and unrest that seems to have no resolution, with people we all know and love losing jobs and more and more living on the brink of poverty it is a comfort, isn’t it, to know that you are “held by God” – dearly loved – and to know where your permanent citizenship lies.

That’s odd, I suppose. Aren’t we all Americans here? Either by birth or adoption aren’t almost all the people you deal with on a daily basis citizens of the United States? Am I the only one here who has gotten choked up more than once watching the Olympics these past weeks when a fellow citizen/even a Minnesotan or 2 stood atop the gold medal platform and our national anthem was played? My only reality for nearly 57 years has been as a citizen of these United States arguably the wealthiest nation in the world with opportunities for education, employment, advancement and the mere accumulation of “stuff” greater than any other land. I have never woken up hungry – unless I’m on a diet, never been without a place to lay my head at night, never been without health insurance, never lost a member of my immediate family to the ravages of war. It’s good to be a citizen of this land.

I am humbled to be able to say that by God’s incredible grace I have never gone to sleep at night or awakened in the morning without the knowledge that I was loved by God – forgiven, a child and heir of heaven. I was not/am not always proud of how I’ve lived as God’s child or the

places I have wandered – but God’s assurance of forgiveness has always been there through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul wanted his beloved Philippians to have that assurance because their lives were not nearly so secure. Oh, perhaps some of them were Roman citizens – no small advantage as it assured you a yearly allotment of grain, a voice in the government, and a trial in Rome if you got in trouble with the law. Along with the Roman citizens there would have been a mixture of others – some Jews, some local Greeks – perhaps slaves and slave-owners could have been in the mix. How odd for the Jews – the children of the promise of Abraham we heard about in Genesis to be rubbing shoulders with Gentiles – literally rubbing shoulders. Formerly they would have had to go for a bath if they touched them and now they were sharing table space in worship and eating the Lord’s Supper together.

All of them would have dealt each day with people whose life marched along to the beat of the festivals – celebrations in honor of the pantheon of gods and goddesses at temples that had been in the area for hundreds of years. Philippi was a center for gold mining, settled by the legions that had been freed after Octavian and Antony had won the battle on the plain of Philippi. It was designed to be a “little Rome.” Lydia, a successful businesswoman, seller of purple ( made from crushing mollusks and literally worth its weight in gold) had heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ from Paul in Philippi and it was in her home that the “house church” met.

Olympic type contests were popular in this – in all the Greco/Roman cities. The rivalries between cities and their athletes was as great as the Vikings vs. Green Bay and people longed to see their favorite win the laurel wreath – a circlet that the Emperor also decided to wear – not just to show he was a winner but to hide his balding pate (TRUE!). The discipline, the training, the focus on the goal of each promising athlete was owned by their fans. Paul is speaking to the Philippians to remind them of their destination – their goal – to rejoice in their citizenship in heaven and to focus their lives on Jesus.

Jesus, in Jerusalem, has reached the destination for which He’d come to earth. He has come there to die. Jerusalem was where the prophets had been slaughtered. Jerusalem was the ultimate place for sacrifice – the home of the temple mount where the fires burned night and day but His innocent suffering and death would not take place near the gilded columns and jewel encrusted porticos of the temple, Jesus would be sacrificed at the place of the skull – at Golgotha by the city dump near the graveyards. That was His goal – the particular race set before Him that no one else could have completed – all, all so you and I could become citizens of heaven.

Speaking to people who knew the importance of citizenship in their culture Paul encourages them to remember the long game – the final goal. Like Father Abraham who continued to wait and believe that God would give him a son (not without slip-ups but remember Abraham had no Bible to read, no synagogue to attend, and God was only visiting him once a decade or so) – like Abraham Paul is encouraging them to live in the midst of God’s promises - to imitate him as he imitated Christ.

That kind of focus – the focus of servanthood, of self-sacrifice, of laying down your life so that others might live – that is a rigorous goal! In my years of teaching I have had many students who would do “Mr. B” imitations – and I confess I have done imitations of them, as

well. Impersonating someone is not what Paul is talking about – this is not the study of mannerisms like Faye Dunaway did to so eerily portray Joan Crawford in Mommie Dearest. The Philippians had seen many fall away from the faith – Paul wants them to see what is at the very center of the Gospel – Jesus – and he wants them to let others see Jesus in them.

This imitation, as Paul has lived it out has great implications for all who follow Christ in every age: "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved" (I Cor 10:32-33). Or, in another passage he says, "To the weak I become weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessing" (I Cor 9:22-23). Imitation of Paul means that we do what we can to show the great love, the life-changing goodness of God – the love of the cross that attracts all to see Jesus by faith and live. And there is one more thing – again difficult to believe that it comes from Paul: Judgmentalism is not allowed – leave the judging to God (though Christians must exercise judgment about what is true or false).

Ah, but beware, this is not a mandate to judge – no, like Paul to his dearly loved Philippians what I must leave you today with is the thought, the knowledge that you are being transformed. The Greek word is (metaschematizo) and can mean a disguise but not in this case. When Paul talked to the Corinthians using this word he said that he and Apollos would be transformed by what they learned from the followers of Jesus/the disciples in Corinth. As a pastor I can tell you that knowing you and caring for you changes me. Here Paul says that imitating Christ – knowing Jesus – focusing your life on Him who laid down His life for you to give you citizenship in heaven for eternity and the power of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you through this life – Paul is saying that as you love as you have been loved so you will be transformed – become more and more like Jesus.

May we live our lives under the shadow of God's wings – held, loved, and transformed by that love to live a life that shows we know where our citizenship is and to Whom we belong.

AMEN

Now may our God who has promised everlasting life to the world through all who turn by faith to the glorious mystery of the cross, gather us and all His children into His arms under the shelter of His mercy