

## **Citizens of Heaven**

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Last week, the board of Goshen College in northern Indiana affirmed a recent controversial decision made by the college president. Flinging aside years of tradition, the president had made the decision to allow the playing of the national anthem before sporting events. As a school founded in an Anabaptist tradition, Goshen College was often unwilling to display national pride because it didn't want to appear to be favoring nationalism over God. As a Mennonite school, the students, faculty, and administration did not want to appear to support policies of the US government that their pacifist faith does not support. In defending the decision, the president said that playing the national anthem would serve to welcome those from other college and traditions, that it would not interfere with their highest allegiance to Jesus, and that it "opens up new possibilities for members of the Goshen College community to publicly offer prophetic critique – if need be – as citizens in the loyal opposition on issues of deepest moral conviction, such as war, racism, and human rights abuses."

Trying to walk the balance between being citizens of the United States and being Christians isn't always as difficult as it is for citizens in other countries, but it can still be a challenge. Being a citizen requires giving up competing claims for loyalty, giving up old allegiances, and fully committing to the duties, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship. When I was in Carbondale on my vicarage, I got to go watch one of the members of the Chinese congregation become a US citizen. When he took the oath, he was giving up an old way and moving towards a new way. Listen to the oath of citizenship that he gave:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this

obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

This oath of citizenship is quite drastic. The first step is severing all previous loyalties with competing countries. Do you remember hearing this language somewhere before? When there's a baptism, one of the first questions is "Do you renounce the devil, all his works, and all his ways?" When we are baptized, we renounce, give up our "citizenship on earth" and instead become citizens of heaven. But how do we do that? How do we maintain the competing citizenships of heaven and of where we are on Earth?

Looking into understanding the context that Paul has in mind when he calls us citizens of heaven helps us to understand better. The city of Philippi was named after Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, who had conquered the part of Macedonia and Greece where it was. Later, it was the site of a great battle in 42 B.C., between Roman forces led by Marc Antony and Octavian on one side, and the forces loyal to Cassius and Brutus, those who had killed Julius Caesar, on the other. After that battle it became a military colony, a place for retired soldiers.

Being a Roman citizen in Philippi wasn't about going home to Rome someday. That wasn't the point. The Roman citizens of Philippi, most of who were retired soldiers, were there for two reasons. The first was that the civil war that had raged showed that it was better for retired soldiers to be someplace other than Rome the next time some ambitious general or senator wanted to make himself leader of Rome. The fewer retired soldiers there were in Rome, the fewer there were to be recruited to cause trouble, incite revolts, and fight against the forces loyal to the current emperor.

But if you were going to keep the retired soldiers out of Rome, you might as well do something useful with them, and that leads to the second reason they were in Philippi. They were there to establish, strengthen, and maintain a Roman presence in an area that was still Greek. They were there to extend Roman influence, to be a colony of Roman culture in the midst of the wider Mediterranean world. They were there not to be temporarily until they retired back to Rome. They were there to bring Rome into where they were.

That is what Paul had in mind when he described us as citizens of heaven. Being a citizen of Rome was not meant to mean an eventual return to Rome. As we see in the other readings from today, citizenship wasn't enough to make you welcome in a capital. Jeremiah was very unwelcome when he traveled to Jerusalem and preached against the political and religious leaders there. When Jesus preached in Jerusalem, he also was placed in opposition to the ruling authorities, against Herod and the religious leaders. Being a citizen didn't protect you unless you came with a welcome message that supported the established powers.

Being a citizen of Rome eventually got Paul to Rome, true. Rome is probably where Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, perhaps the last of the letters of Paul in the New Testament to be written. But he was in Rome in chains, imprisoned, awaiting his trial before the Roman emperor, Nero. Being a citizen of Rome gave Paul a quicker death by beheading than many other Christians got, but that's all it got him. It didn't protect him from the whims of an emperor who fiddled while Rome burned and used Christians as torches to light the city. It was Paul's citizenship in heaven, Paul's place in the kingdom of God, that saved him, and that saves us.

Being a citizen of heaven in Philippi was like being a citizen of Rome in Philippi. It is meant that they were there to establish, strengthen, and maintain a heavenly presence where they were. It meant continuing their work to transform the surrounding culture, but not to make it more Roman. It meant to make it look more like heaven.

The same is true for us, as well. Being citizens of heaven means more than knowing where we are going when we die. Being citizens of heaven means that we live here as a colony of heaven, that we continue the work of Jesus and Paul to proclaim the kingdom of God, to share the Good News with those around us, and to shape the surrounding culture to be more like heaven.

As Lutherans, we don't see that our heavenly citizenship means that we need to separate ourselves from the world. No, we know that it means that it sends, pushes us out into the world to transform it, to show God's love as we live out our callings as teachers and students, parents and children, and as citizens. And as citizens of heaven, we look to follow the example of Jesus. The season of Lent is a time of walking in the

steps that Jesus walked, heading towards the cross. Because when we are baptized, we are crucified with Christ. And when we are crucified with Christ, we also rise to new life with Christ. We are transformed to conform to Jesus, and to transform the world around us.

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