

PHILIPPIANS 3:17 - 4:1

Second Sunday of Lent,^a March 12-14, 2022

Smith

OUR CITIZENSHIP (ΠΟΛΙΤΕΥΜΑ) IS IN HEAVEN

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. ¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

“Remember your mercy, O Lord. Remember your mercy and love. Amen.” Historically, the church has considered this Epistle lesson either in a week late in the summer, a week that doesn’t always occur, or else here in the second Sunday of Lent. Since the beginning of our text is about sanctified or holy living, it’s good to ground ourselves in this season of the Church Year: Christ crucified for us. This is what leads us to respond in the way that Paul describes, using him as a model or pattern. We won’t all come out looking like cookie-cutter Pauls, but we want to follow his example of living with the cross at the center of our attention and to be examples for those who will follow.

Keeping Jesus front and center in our lives helps us to face attacks from the enemies of the cross. Notice that Paul calls them “enemies of the cross” and not simply “enemies” or “enemies of our faith.” This helps us to remember that those who oppose us-- the devil, the world, and even our own personal sinful human nature-- they are opposing Christ and the victory he won on the cross. And so: What ground am I willing to give up against such enemies when they attack? Anything but the cross of Christ; anything but the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. My clothes, my cats, my car, my home, my spouse, my family, my reputation, my name, my health, my life. They can take it all, attack me, abuse me, make laws against me, but they cannot have the cross of Jesus Christ.

And this, Paul says, is because our true citizenship is not in Minnesota, or in the USA, or in this world or a global village. Our citizenship is different. In order for us to understand this passage correctly, I need to define a Greek word: πολίτευμα, *politeuma*, translated

^a Reminiscere Sunday gets its name from the 25th Psalm, “Remember your mercy, O Lord.”

“citizenship” in our NIV version. However, **πολίτευμα** isn’t simply to ‘be’ a citizen, but it is our place of citizenship. Where is it, where you’re a citizen? Perhaps you have strongly political or patriotic views these days, and that’s completely understandable. But Paul the Apostle tells us: turn that down a bit. Back it up. Don’t forget that you and I are not citizens, that is, permanent dwellers with the rights of Fatherlanders, of any spread of real estate in this world. We are strangers here; aliens, foreigners, immigrants. Our citizenship, our true place of citizenship and of belonging, is in heaven.

When a Christian is called home in death, five things take place.

First, the soul separates from thos body and is taken immediately to God’s throne in heaven. In one place where Jesus talks about this event, he assures us that our spirits are actually carried to heaven “by angels” (Luke 16:22).

Second, the body, deprived now of its spirit, decays in death and is buried, to await the resurrection. When that body awakens to the trumpet call of God on the Last Day, it will rise remade, perfect, and glorious, as similar to the present body as the true body is to its reflection in a mirror, and yet different in glory in the way that the sun outshines the moon, or a bride on her wedding day outshines all other women.

Thirdly, for those of us who remain on earth, the memory of that loved one begins to be sealed in oral traditions, the stories we tell about them and remember and share with one another, and there will be a small amount of idealization that takes place, which is one of the best applications of Luther’s words in the explanation to the Eighth Commandment, as we say in the newest translation of the Catechism, “we take things in the kindest possible way,” or as many of us learned from a previous translation of Luther’s words: “We put the best construction on everything.”

Fourthly, There is rejoicing in heaven^a over the spirit’s arrival. This rejoicing, which also takes place when sinners repent, erupts into joyful song when a new citizen of heaven arrives home.

And Fifthly, corresponding to the rejoicing in heaven, there is also an equal and opposite disappointment in the devil’s realm in perdition because, yet again, as is the case with every Christian called home to glory, the devil has failed yet again to tear any of these little ones out of the Father’s hands.

^a Luke 15:7

Think of all of the temptations that the devil sets in our path, all of the pitfalls of our lives. For some, the devil has success by accusing and by fearmongering, so that the cross is obscured from the vision of some Christians who are then left wallowing in sin, guilt, fear, embarrassment, and shame. For others, the devil has better success with outright lies, fake news; ‘alternate facts,’ obscuring the cross from other Christians by planting false contentment and pride in the heart, or by causing a Christian to think that a certain sin is no sin at all, and does not anger God, or that this or that sin cannot be a sin because it makes him happy.

How can this mess be cleaned up? By the simple gifts God gives in his word: the law to condemn the sinner, and the gospel to lift the sinner back up again.

When we think about our citizenship here on earth, we see that earthly citizenships can be a good thing. Citizenship in a certain country can give freedom to worship without much interference from the government, without fear of violent or deadly attacks because of one’s faith.

Citizenship on earth is based on where you were born, or if you make a conscious decision later in life to forsake one country for another. Our heavenly citizenship is not like either of those. It is not based on any decision that we make, nor is it based on our human birth, race, family, language, or any other association. It is based on our rebirth in Christ, the gift of the gospel that comes only by the grace of God.

The closest enemy of the cross of Christ is the one we carry around with us all the time: our sinful human nature. This is most especially when the Christian becomes convinced that he is righteous because he is basically good, or good enough for God, because nobody can be perfect. But the righteousness demanded by God does not change: It is the righteousness demanded of Jesus, and which only he kept with his life and words and thoughts. But the sinful man is not righteous, and God does not move the bar. Man wishes it were so, and he learns to hate the law and to hate even the gospel because he wants his own life to be good enough for God. But may God crush mankind’s hatred of the law. Let us rather be afraid of it, so that we need the gospel, long for the gospel, yearn for the gospel.

Only in the gospel of the cross of Christ are we made righteous before God, and brought into our citizenship in heaven. While we await our arrival, we can model Paul’s good pattern, and be patterns to our children-- no matter what their age, or yours. What imprint will you make on them today?

Amen