



August 19-21, 2023 -- 12th Sunday after Pentecost

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Celebrate Our New Christian Citizenship

1. By leaving the old country behind
2. By displaying our patriotism

This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. 6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." 8 The Sovereign LORD declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered." Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8

In the saving name of the Triune God, dear Christian friends,

You can meet some interesting people on Uber rides in the big city. My wife and I took an Uber and we met our driver, Vladimir – he said he was from Cuba. He also said that he dreamed one day of being an American citizen. You probably realize it's quite a process to become an American citizen and it includes taking and passing a written citizenship test. Have you ever seen the test questions before? Let's share a few and let's see how well you'd do. Question #1 When was the constitution of the United States written? An easy one, right? The correct answer is 1787. Question #2 How many voting members are in the House of Representatives? The correct answer is 435. Okay. I think we can all admit it's been a while since some of us have been in a high school history class. But, how much do you want to wager that a naturalized citizen knows the answers better than we do? My point? I think we tend to undervalue our American citizenship. The rest of the world longs for the privileges and freedoms we enjoy. We possess these privileges and freedoms ONLY by God's Grace. And even though we don't always appreciate them, thank God our government won't take them away this week. The Bible teaches us this beautiful truth: not only are we citizens of America, but by Holy Baptism, we also enjoy dual citizenship of heaven. How easy it is take this heavenly citizenship for granted. What a relief it is to know because of Jesus Christ, God will not expel us from His heavenly presence. So pull up a pew and listen closely to God's Word recorded in Isaiah, Chapter 56. God's Word is going to refresh our memories with a heavenly history lesson. And as we listen, God's Holy Spirit will lead us to Celebrate Our New Christian Citizenship. Let's celebrate first by leaving the old country behind. And let's celebrate by displaying our patriotism.

Have you ever traveled overseas? How long was your trip? When I was in high school back in the 1980s at MLS, I lived in Germany for five weeks as a German exchange student. I toured a lot of castles and learned a LOT about German culture. But, I always knew as a tourist I'd return back home to America. But, when we're talking about immigrating to a new country, just the opposite is true. Whoever wants to become an citizen usually burns his/her bridges to the old

county. When God made us Christian citizens in Holy Baptism, He separated us from this old sinful world. We now celebrate our new Christian Citizenship by leaving this old country behind. And that's NOT an easy thing to do. Remember our sinful nature wants to hold on to this broken, sinful world even though as Christians we are reminded we DON'T belong here. We belong in heaven. Yet, we live here and God calls us to be different than every one else. We're not better than anyone else ... we're just forgiven. The Bible teaches us that we're forgiven foreigners and called to live forgiven lives. It's not easy to be a foreigner because you sometimes you really stick out. Just go to a grocery store where no one speaks English. It's hard to figure out what the products on the shelves are and you're afraid to ask any questions for fear of looking dumb. We can only begin to imagine how isolated immigrants must feel in our country. May we all do more in Christian love to welcome those from other cultures.

In a similar way, our sinful nature puts enormous pressure on us to conform to this world. It's sad, but true. Our original citizenship is the devil's homeland and Satan's way of thinking permeates our culture and yes, our own little corner of the world. So why do we underestimate Satan? Is it because most of us have been Christians all our lives and that we can easily let our guard down? Is it because we often forget to thank God for rescuing us from the old country of hell and putting us on the road to heaven?

Back in Isaiah's day, the Old Testament Jews forgot that. They enjoyed the special status as God's chosen people (the blood line of the Savior would come from their race and they were responsible for sharing God's Holy Word with all nations). But, they had the wrong impression that they were somehow better than other nations. The truth is that the Jews were just as corrupt as everyone else. And most of them didn't realize it until it was too late. Not race, but GRACE made them citizens of God's country. Not race, but Grace is what moved God to rescue the Jews from horrible slavery in Egypt. And not race, but Grace is what kept God from righteously wiping the Jews out for their rebellion and sin. And, not race but Grace is the reason we are Christian believers today.

There's another way for people to immigrate into the United States. It works sort of like a visa lottery. Each country is given a certain number of visas each year. If you win the lottery, you get a visa, regardless of where you are in the process. In a very real way, as baptized believers, we've won God's lottery, haven't we – the lottery of heaven? Jesus Christ is the only one in history who has earned His place in God's kingdom. And by faith His perfect qualifications have now become ours. In our sermon reading from Isaiah, chapter 56, God says: for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. St. Paul says something similar in Romans 1:17: For in the Gospel a righteousness is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written "The righteous will live by faith." If you have an American passport, you can come and go from this country and enjoy our government's protection even if you travel outside America's borders. In a much similar way because of Christ Jesus, we enjoy God's protection, everywhere we travel in this foreign land of earth. We are never outside of the kingdom of God because it is written, my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. This precious promise is not only for us, but for all our neighbors and coworkers we still need to reach in Brown County, those who don't know their Savior. As God declares: I will

gather still others to them besides those already gathered. Especially when we remember the hell God has rescued us from, we are filled heavenly peace, gratitude, and hope. But, we aren't the only ones to win God's lottery. Remember God doesn't play favorites in His kingdom. Our church is for new people too. It's for singles and families, for people with ancestors in Germany, Mexico, Asia and Africa. It's for people who've grown up WELS, and for people who have no idea what WELS stands for. St. Paul's is not a country club for saints but a hospital for sinners. Instead of simply asking our friends and neighbors immigration test questions, may God move our hearts to invite one more person to join us to worship God in this place.

Obviously not everyone in the world wants to become an American citizen. But, foreigners who become naturalized citizens tend to be more patriotic, more loyal to our country than even natural born citizens. How much more as Christians will we celebrate our heavenly citizenship by displaying our Christian patriotism and loyalty!

People come to America for a variety of reasons – to escape war, for religious freedom, or to find a better life for themselves and their families. No one forces them to immigrate. It's something they do willingly. Let's look at our heavenly citizenship in a similar way. God didn't force us to become believers. But, He used the Good News of Jesus and heaven to capture our hearts. And like those foreigners in our reading, that changes us too. Let's hear how God changes us: 6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Just like how recent immigrants are often the biggest flag wavers, so also are newer Christians and newer St. Paul's members tend to be more passionate about their faith. I wish you could see what I get to see as a St. Paul's pastor each week. It's amazing to see how new people in BIC or in worship love to study the Bible more and are so interested in being active in their Christian faith! It also makes me wonder: as a lifelong Lutheran am I ever apathetic or just lukewarm about sharing the Gospel or loving my neighbor as Jesus has loved me? What really goes through my mind as I come to worship, put money in the offering plate, or spend hours at a St. Paul's ministry? Am I ever guilty of resentment, complaining, or of just going through the motions? But, let me get even more personal ... are you? May our Savior forgive us by His blood-stained cross and empty tomb. And may He fire us up with His Holy Spirit to show genuine Christian patriotism. Let's reach more people for Christ.

As I was growing up, frankly, I really appreciate the great value of my American citizenship. Now that God has let me travel to foreign countries like Germany, Israel, Egypt, and Mexico, I've seen up close and personal how citizens in other countries live. After seeing this, I don't believe many of us would ever willingly give up our American citizenship. But, someday, one day, maybe today, it's going to come our turn to die. And on that day, God will take away our American citizenship ... permanently. But, take heart, my Christian friends. It also means that by His grace, God will grant us full citizenship in heaven. And because of Jesus, THAT is worth longing for and living for today. Amen.