

March 13, 2022 Lent 2C
Phil. 3:20
Living As Citizens of Heaven

"But our citizenship is in heaven..." Philippians 3:20

I want to spend some time today with this one phrase of Paul's in Philippians 3:20: "But our citizenship is in heaven..." Let's start with the word "citizenship." We belong to and live in a community that determines how we live. We have rights and privileges as citizens of that community. And we have responsibilities and commitments.

Each of us has several different communities of which we are a part. We are born into a community called the family where we have rights and privileges and responsibilities and commitments. Most of us have been baptized into another community called the Church where we have rights and privileges and responsibilities and commitments. Most of us at different times in our lives have been hired into a community called our occupation where we have rights and privileges and responsibilities and commitments. And we have neighborhoods and social circles and civic groups all where we have rights and privileges and responsibilities and commitments.

And then there is heaven. Paul says our citizenship is in heaven. We have rights and privileges that originate in heaven. We have responsibilities and commitments that originate in heaven.

We are in the season of Lent. Lent is a time of repentance, and we often take that to be a time for self-examination and renewal. Being a citizen of heaven is not easy. But it is probably not as hard for us as it was Jeremiah. Did you catch what was going on in our Old Testament reading?

Jeremiah is trying to live as a citizen of heaven...and people want to kill him for it. God had given him some words to speak to the people of Judah and he spoke them and got this response, "You must die." I'm sure I've preached some unpopular sermons in my time, but I have yet to run into anyone who wants to kill me over my sermon.

Jeremiah had done some other rather "unorthodox" stuff in his ministry to the people of Judah that may not have put him in their best graces. At one

point he took a vase and shattered it on the steps of the temple and told the people this is how God would shatter them if they didn't change their ways. He also walked all over town with a yoke on his shoulders telling people this is how God would enslave them for their sin. And my favorite—he wore the same shirt for months without taking it off and then told the people this was how their sin made them stink before God.

If Jeremiah showed up at St. Matthew, we probably wouldn't kill him, but we would probably call 911 and have him taken away. And yet, he was living as a citizen of heaven. Being a citizen of heaven may not make us popular. Being a citizen of heaven may look weird to some people.

And then there's Jesus. As far as citizenship in heaven goes, Jesus leads the way. In the Gospel reading from Luke for today, Jesus is confronted with the fear of what Herod might do. There is no question that Jesus had already been seen as a threat to Herod's temporal power. Eventually, Herod will be so fearful of Jesus that he will avoid a direct confrontation and send him to Pilate to handle the problem instead.

Jesus stands His ground, assured that He is doing God's business, "casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow." He's living as a citizen of heaven. He is rejecting the world's way as the best way and doing it heaven's way.

I find the "casting out demons" language here interesting. Certainly it can (and should) be taken literally. But there are all kinds of things that demonize and possess people. Do you realize that helping to feed others is casting out the demon of hunger and want? So whenever you provide a meal or some groceries for someone, you are rejecting the world's demonic tyranny and doing the work of heavenly citizenship.

Do you know that when you offer prayer for someone who is sick, alone or overwhelmed, you reject the world's implicit message that only the strong and powerful will inherit? That whenever you listen, just listen, to someone who is trying to sort out a problem or recover from a broken relationship, you are offering pastoral care in the name of Jesus, who always takes time for His children, even when others reject them as hapless or hopeless.

Doing actions like these brings that prophetic voice of hope to people who need it, and we do these acts in the firm conviction that by bringing the Good News to others, we are bringing God's promises into the world.

These are the rights and privileges and responsibilities and commitments of citizenship in heaven.

I've put together an incomplete list of what heavenly citizenship looks like in 21st century Columbia Heights:

- As individuals and as the church, practice ministry to people outside of St. Matthew as much as to those within it. Both are important, but vitality exists when the promises of God reach beyond the doors of a Church.
- Look for opportunities to serve others. Ask God each day what the plan God has for you is – and be prepared to be surprised at what opportunities to minister to others come your way. If you are not able to volunteer outside of your home, perhaps you can arrange a phone visit or write a card to someone, so they know they are cared for.
- Refuse to watch the news when it becomes disturbing to you. We are powerless over much of what happens, but we often let it take control of our lives, and we lose our focus when we do.
- Search for stories of Good News. They are often in the feature section of newspapers (if you are still able to get one) or in feature stories on television. You have to look for them, but they are there, brimming with accounts of courage and leadership changing our world for the better.
- Focus your charitable giving on things (or one thing) that you perceive is making an impact on the lives of others, including the world of nature that is under so much stress. You will feel a sense of connection with God's creation outside of your immediate sphere. You will also be helping to bring God's work into the world.

These suggestions are some ways you can live as citizens of heaven. The more we become part of heaven in our mission and ministry on earth, the

more we see heaven unfolding and the more that prayer we pray every week—"Thy kingdom come"—gets answered by what God does through us.

But there are two more that I have to give you. These come more under rights and privileges than commitments and responsibilities.

- Communicate with God. You can't have a relationship with someone you don't talk to. Open your Bible and hear God speak to you. Spend time in prayer speaking to God.
- One more, spend time focusing on how you became a citizen of heaven. The only-begotten Son of God lived perfectly and died innocently to give you your heavenly citizenship. Every day let the cross of Jesus be both your starting point and the point to which you return to find all that you need to live as a citizen of heaven.

God makes promises to each of us, and there are two that are particular to us as we observe the season of Lent. The first is that we are all citizens of heaven and our lives will be bound together with each other and our Creator and Redeemer.

The second promise is the gift of Jesus, God's son, who is our assurance of salvation and life eternal. We are baptized into his death and resurrection, and we are reminded of that each Sunday when we hear that Good News and then experience that promise when we partake of Jesus' risen body and blood at Communion.

Lent is a time to take heart, to bear one another's burdens with grace and care, to take care of ourselves so that we are strong for others, and to be witnesses to the promises that God makes and will certainly keep. Now go be citizens of heaven. Amen.

C. S. Lewis in The Problem of Pain: "Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home."