



Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

### *Good Citizens*

#### **Philippians 3:17-4:1**

*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. 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.*

**A while ago I was going through the items that my mother had saved from my childhood. Among them were some of my old report cards. It was fun reading the different comments my teachers wrote many years ago. There were the usual comments about the efforts that I was making and the areas in which I was doing well. There were also prophetic comments like: “Brent should keep his desk neater.” One or two teachers wrote about not paying attention in class and being easily distracted. My kindergarten teacher was concerned because I admired the class troublemaker for all the wrong reasons. She wrote in my report card: “Brent admires John Simmons for all of his (John’s) bad traits.”**

**In addition to the grades for the usual elementary subjects, Reading, Math, Writing, Spelling, and Science, there was also a grade for a category called “citizenship.” I can’t remember any classes or discussions that we had on citizenship, but judging from the comments, citizenship referred to a host of different behaviors like following the rules, active participation, manners, the**

way that other students were treated, general attitude about things, and respect for teachers and other authorities.

What are the hallmarks of good citizenship for adults? The list should include voting, paying taxes, obeying the laws, (even when no one is watching). Citizenship should also include the respect with which we accord the state and its institutions. It would reflect those duties that obligate us. Citizenship would also include virtues like loyalty, sacrifice, patriotism. If we were still graded on our citizenship, how would we fare?

What does all of this have to do with Lent? After all, Lent is a time for introspection. It is a time to reflect upon our lives and how we translate our faith into practice. And that is the rub. Each of us, by our baptism has “dual citizenship.” Paul, writing to the Philippians said, “our citizenship is in heaven.”

The apostle Paul used the language of citizenship to describe a Christian’s identity: “our citizenship is in heaven.” This is peculiar language for religion. It is the language of politics and the state. The language is even more pointed when we realize that this letter was addressed to the church in Philippi. The city of Philippi was located in Greece, but it was a very important Roman city. It was in Philippi that Caesar Augustus and Mark Antony defeated Brutus and Cassius, thus consolidating their power and assuring Rome a period of peace and stability. The citizens of Philippi, though part of the Greek peninsula, took a lot of pride in their Roman citizenship.

Roman Citizenship afforded a host of benefits. It assured a level of due process which was uncommon in the ancient world. Citizenship also required certain behaviors. One requirement was the allegiance to the Emperor. This was objectionable to Christians. The Caesar was viewed as a deity, and for the citizens of Philippi, it was their city that witnessed the rise of Augustus to power. So when Paul wrote... “We are citizens of heaven”, he had the attention of the people of Philippi. But after he had their attention, what did he mean?

**We should not be surprised by the political language that Paul used to describe a spiritual reality. Jesus preached about the “Kingdom of God.” The term, “Lord” was used as a term of respect for those in political authority. Jesus was crucified as “King of the Jews.” Even the term “covenant” had its origins in the political language of the ancient world. A covenant was a type of treaty that was made between a more powerful vassal and a weaker ruler or king. This treaty or covenant was used to explain the way that God related to human beings.**

**“Citizens of Heaven”, might have surprised the people of Philippi, but it was consistent with much of the language of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels. The language of citizenship and politics was the norm for the biblical writers.**

**What are the requirements of citizenship in heaven?**

- 1. The first requirement is a clear identity. When we travel in other countries, people identify us as Americans, because we carry a U.S. passport. At times it can be an issue, but most of the time it is something that we don't deny and are often proud of. The way we act, the values we have, the language we use (English) also reveal who we are in terms of our citizenship.**

**What is the passport for those who are citizens of Heaven? Is there an identifier? A lot of people wear crosses around their necks as jewelry, and it is an appropriate symbol of identification. But do the lives of those who are wearing those crosses show the same spirit of love and sacrifice that those crosses represent? The passport, the identifier of heavenly citizenship is the love of Christ we embody in our relationships with others. As the hymn goes: “They will know we are Christians by our love.” Will they?**

**Jesus told those who would follow him, if they truly wanted to show their love for Christ, they would need to show it to those whom he called, “the least of these.” The hungry, the sick, the homeless, the scorned, the imprisoned...**

**Does the world identify us as Christians by our actions? By our words? Or only by the jeweled crosses around our neck?**

- 2. The second requirement is loyalty and commitment. I have often commented sarcastically that our age has traded commitment for consumerism, even in the area of faith. We buy cars and homes...and we shop for religion in the same way. A citizen is not a person who is on a shopping trip for another country. A citizen of heaven is loyal and committed.... And that commitment is at the core of one's being. Jesus often used hyperbole to emphasize how important and primary this commitment is. He told his followers that family does not come first... God does. All other commitments and loyalties are relativized by our loyalty to the Kingdom of heaven.**
  
- 3. The third requirement is our life's spiritual journey leads to home: heaven. The early Christians thought of themselves as "sojourners". The book of Hebrews declares, "We have no earthly home, but seek the city which is yet to come." Our pilgrim ancestors of this country saw their lives in terms of a spiritual journey... hence the world pilgrim. We journey through this life, just as we journey through countries, cities and other areas. Journeys are just that. In truth we are on our way home to that place where our true citizenship resides.**

**Jesus spoke of heaven in terms of a party with a great banquet. When we get home there will be a great meal: a banquet. That is the way that Christ described it, and it ties directly to our celebration of the Lord's Supper. Think about it. We often eat the cuisine of other nations: Chinese, German, Italian, French, Mexican, Indian and Thai.**

**The Lord's Supper is our native food. The meal that we include as part of our worship, simple bread and wine, is the food of our homeland. It is a foretaste of the food we will partake in the great meal, when at last we are home....**

**Citizens of heaven, may we never forget where we belong, and may we never lose our way home. Amen**