

Citizenship

Texts: Genesis 15:1-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1;
Luke 13:31-35 Date: 07/05/20

Fish swim in water all the time, but they don't know what it means to be wet. That's because they're always wet. You have to know what it is to be dry before you can have a good idea of what it is to be wet, and a fish that's dry is, well, a dead fish, and doesn't know anything.

It's the same thing with citizenship. You're born with it, you grow up with it, you take it for granted. It's what you live with. You don't realize what it means until you have to live without it.

I know a little bit about this because I am currently living in a country of which I am not a citizen. I'm just a legal permanent resident – *legal!* so put your cell phones away, no reason to report me to the INS – and that puts me into an interesting middle ground.

I pay taxes, but I can't vote. I pay for Social Security and Medicare, but I won't ever be eligible for it. I have no Senator and no congressman.

If I commit a crime, I can be deported and told never to return. I have no right to be here, just the privilege of being allowed to stay because of my wife and children.

Our immigration lawyer told me that I wouldn't even be allowed to teach in a public school because of the danger that I would bring un-American ideas into the classroom.

Why I'm allowed to preach I don't know! Perhaps they think that preaching is pointless, and will have no effect on the people who hear it, a view I sometimes take myself!

Or perhaps it's because you folks are all grown-ups and presumably immune to my nefarious Canadian subversions.

(In Canadian) But if you're not careful, I'll soon have you talking like a bunch of Canuck hosers, eh, and cheering on Team Canada. Then we'll all go a few clicks to Timmies for a cup of coffee with whitener, and maybe a maple sugar donut or a butter tart. That should only cost a couple of loonies or a toonie. Don't forget to get a serviette.

After we ask for the bill, if it's cold out, we'll put on our toques and go out into the – 5 degree weather, maybe stopping at Mac's to buy a few bags of homo milk and some brown bread for breakfast. To close out the night, we'll go out for some 5-pin bowling before going to our houses to sit on our chesterfields and share a 2-4 and talk about curling.

If you want a translation of that, you can talk to me after the service!

No, citizenship is a precious thing, even if we sometimes take it for granted. It means we belong, we have a right to be there, and no one can kick us out. It means that we share in a culture and understand some common things of our lives that outsiders might not get right away. But because we live with that citizenship and that culture from birth, it's like the fish swimming in the water: we live in it, but we might not always notice it.

But if you come from somewhere else, you are more aware of it, or if you go somewhere else, you might stick out like a sore thumb. Last night, Kate was laughing at me as we took our family walk with the dog and watched the fireworks. I was cheerily wishing everyone we met 'a happy fourth!' ... Like a sore thumb.

In our first Bible story, from the book of Ruth, a woman from Judah, named Naomi, and her husband Elimelech are forced to take refuge in the foreign country of Moab because of a famine. While they are there, Naomi's sons fall in love with local girls, Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth.

Interestingly, Orpah is the person Oprah Winfrey is named after, though Oprah's mother didn't quite read the name right. Oprah had a show named after her, but Ruth has a Bible book named after her, so she's the one to pay attention to.

Unfortunately, Elimelech died, and so did Naomi's two sons. Naomi decided to go home to Judah, and told her two daughters-in-law to stay behind in Moab. In tears, Orpah stayed in Moab, but Ruth told her mother-in-law that she would come with her: 'Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God.'

It's a remarkable moment, because it's the moment that Ruth decides to be an immigrant to Judah, to leave behind everything she knows, and the culture and gods she knows, and begin a new life, with new customs and new habits.

Back when I told Kate that I would move to the United States to marry her, and I don't think she remembers this, but I actually quoted this verse to her: where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people."

So it was with Ruth. She left Moab and went to Israel, to the area around Bethlehem, and she adopted a new country, and new customs, and a new God. Eventually she marries one of Ruth's kinsmen, a man from the clan of Elimelech named Boaz. And that would be the end of it, except that Boaz and Ruth have a son named Obed, and Obed had a son named Jesse, and Jesse had a son named David.

Yes, he's that David, King David, Israel's greatest king, and the ancestor of Jesus the Messiah! Holy cow, right? King David is the great-grandson of a Moabite immigrant! Without that one immigrant woman, the nation's history would have been far different. Without that immigrant woman, the Messiah would never have been born. You never know what those pesky immigrants are going to get up to! Israel: the place where

anyone can grow up to be King, even the great grandson of an immigrant, one of the hated Moabites!

Being an immigrant means ultimately adopting the culture of the place where you move to, becoming more like the people who live there, until you totally fit in and no one even questions whether you belong there anymore. Your children are people of that place, and not people of the place you used to live. You go from being a stranger without citizenship, to being part of the fabric of the nation, totally belonging.

It's good to know a little about being an immigrant, because our destiny is all to be immigrants into God's country. That's what Paul is talking about when he says that our citizenship is in heaven. He means that the place we really belong, whose customs and whose God we must adapt to, is the heavenly realm where God rules.

So we should ask what it means to be a citizen, and immigrant citizens at that.

The great popular philosopher, Mortimer J. Adler, once wrote that, in a democracy, the chief office is not that of president, prime minister, senator or congressman, but that of citizen.

You can survive with a bad president, senator or congress person, but if the citizens do not fulfill their office, if they shirk their duties of being informed about issues, of exercising their right to vote, of participating in the life of the community, the democracy will soon fall apart.

So citizens are important. Now citizenship in Philippi, where the people lived that Paul was writing to, had a two prong meaning, since Philippi was a Greek city in the Roman Empire.

A citizen to the Greeks was literally a resident of a city, a city denizen, a citi-zen. Citizens were expected to take part in the deliberations of the community. They voted on the laws and they were the juries, with sometimes as many as 501 people sitting at a single time to listen to a case.

Citizens were expected to fill the offices of the state, and these offices were often simply assigned by lot. That meant that every citizen had to be prepared to lead. That already says a lot about how Paul views our role in the church.

Citizens had a duty to their fellow citizens, and had to protect the city from anyone or anything that threatened it. It was the duty of a citizen to contribute to the building of the city, to its great monuments and its important public buildings. Citizens were expected to be more concerned about the public good than about their private gain. Already, we see that Biblical citizenship is a bit different than we're used to.

Being a citizen was a privilege and meant a sense of belonging. It meant full participation in the community's political, economic and social life. To have the privilege

of membership of a citizen and not to fulfill your duties as a citizen meant that you were a person unworthy of your high calling as a citizen, a private person, not part of the community. The Greeks had a word for that kind of person: an *idiotes*. We get our word idiot from it: an idiot is literally a citizen who doesn't participate in the life of the community. Don't be an idiot, either in society or in the church!

On the other side, to the Romans, being a citizen stressed, not so much participation, as it did with the Greeks, as much as legal rights. A Roman citizen was equal with all other Roman citizens. A Roman citizen had the right to the protection of the laws, to be treated with respect even when accused of a crime.

A Roman citizen did not have to be an actual resident of Rome, because the Romans conferred citizenship on their conquered territories, and thus co-opted the subject peoples into being proud Romans, sharing with them the legal privileges of the Roman born.

Being a Roman citizen meant something else: it meant you had the protection of all the might and power of Rome behind you. I've never heard it better summarized than in a speech from the tv show *The West Wing*, where President Bartlet is talking about citizenship:

Bartlet: *Did you know that two thousand years ago a Roman citizen could walk across the face of the known world free of the fear of molestation? He could walk across the Earth unharmed, cloaked only in the protection of the words civis Romanus sum -- I am a Roman citizen. So great was the retribution of Rome, universally certain, should any harm befall even one of its citizens that no one dared harm any of them.*

The Roman Emperor was considered the great protector, and the last hope of his subjects. We know from inscriptions on monuments that he liked to call himself the Savior of his people.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he stressed that their true citizenship was in heaven, and that their Savior was Jesus Christ. They understood that Paul was saying that God was their protector, and that their Savior was not Caesar, but Christ.

So Christian citizenship might turn out to be somewhat countercultural, too! The Romans certainly understood that Christians living out the values of Christ and God's country could be a threat to Caesar's rule, and a challenge to their culture, as well as living within it.

So how might a Christian culture look different from American culture? If Paul was challenging Greco-Roman culture with the Gospel, how might he challenge Canadian-American culture?

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that God has made the church international and cross-cultural, so that Christians on the outside of a culture can speak to those of us on

the inside. Together, we can see more clearly what Christian culture is, Christian citizenship.

I was lucky enough to spend some months in Thailand, working with Christians there. And while I was in Thailand, even though I was a Canadian, everybody assumed I was an American, and to them, it didn't really make a difference.

My Thai friends were astonished at some aspects of North American culture that seemed totally unchristian to them. They thought that North American culture took far too little interest in community, and far too much interest in the self.

"Surely," they said to me, "you can see that the Bible is all about life in community, all about putting yourself second and the community first? How can North American Christians live for themselves so much, when Christianity is about dying to self and living for Christ?"

"Well, um," I said, "I'm not sure we'd see it that way."

"Okay," they said, "but what about the American obsession with money? What about Jesus saying that you should give all you have to the poor? What about the parable of the rich fool, who built up wealth and then never lived to spend it because God demanded his life from him? What about the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, where Lazarus the beggar goes to heaven, but the rich man who wouldn't share goes to hell? What about that?"

"Well, we mostly don't think of ourselves as rich like those rich men," I said.

Open mouthed staring accompanied this statement. I looked around. I was living in what most of these country Thai folks considered luxury in Thailand, and I had no running water and an open pit toilet. I had more clothes in my suitcase than they had had in their lives.

"How about your obsession with military power? What about your obsession with sex and pleasure? What about your lifestyles of laziness, watching TV all day?"

This was getting hard. I tried to say, "It's not like that, really." And it isn't, but enough of what they had to say was true that I was getting uncomfortable. It seemed like they could go on and on. I thought I was there to teach them about Christianity, but they were teaching me! Lesson learned!

They saw it, and they laughed, and hugged me, and said, "Samson" – they called me Samson because I was so much bigger than they were – and fatter, even though I weighed 170 pounds at the time!, "Samson," they said, "brother Samson, it's okay. We love you. God will forgive you as he forgives us. We were blind too, until your people came to us with Christ, and helped us see what we were doing wrong. But, please, we have learned from you, now please learn from us. There is so much that is wonderful about your culture and your Christianity, only a few things you could change."

And with smiles all around and hugs, the conversation was over. And I was glad.
Really glad!

In the Christian life, we are all adopting another country's culture, all of us are being called by God into a future with a new people, in a new place, a place where God grants citizenship to people from every nation, a place where we will all belong, all have God's protection, all have a crucial part to play.

As we think about our citizenship this week – and a happy Fourth of July to you all! – let us remember that our true citizenship is in heaven, and that we are preparing ourselves to be immigrants there, making a new family in a new home, with a new culture and new ways of thinking. That's the challenge for us all.

In the meantime, God says to us, "Don't worry. Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. I will be your God, and you will be my people." And God invites us to enter into the customs of this new country by calling us to God's own table, to share in one of the customs of our new country, the Lord's Supper.

Come, citizens of heaven, let us get our passports ready, and travel together to God's country at God's table. Amen