

**Rev. Mike Cole**  
**Providence Presbyterian Church**  
**Second Sunday in Lent**  
**March 16, 2025**  
**Luke 13:31-35; Philippians 3:17-4:1**

**"Citizens of Heaven"**

Last Christmas, my granddaughter, Katelynn, came for a visit with her boyfriend. For some reason she brought her passport with her and left it behind. My son, Colin, who was here also, picked it up and intended to take it to her, but life got in the way and he just delivered it to her yesterday. She told him, "You don't have to bother. I can get it anytime." Colin said, "no it's actually illegal for me to have your passport," which surprised me. It makes sense in these days of identity theft, but I hadn't really thought about it.

How many of us have a passport? If we are going to travel out of our country, a passport is essential. It tells officials and others who we are, where we are from, where we have been and where we are going.

That reminds me of a college student who walked into a campus bookstore and asked the clerk, "Do you have a compass?" "Which kind" the clerk responded, "the one for going places or the one for going in circles?" Looking at our faith, we should be asking a similar question: "What kind of faith do we want, the one for going places or the one for going in circles?"

The Philippian Christians to whom Paul wrote his letter were practicing a faith that was just taking them in circles and Paul set about the task of getting them on the track of a faith that would take them places. The church in Philippi was a congregation that was torn apart by pride, envy and personal agendas. They were on a circular path that led nowhere.

That's why Paul says in verse 12, "Not that I have already obtained Christ-like faith or am already perfect." Paul wanted the Philippian Christians to know that he was still on the way to faith and that he had not arrived, as apparently some of them had claimed about themselves. The obvious conclusion they were intended to draw was that if Paul hadn't achieved perfection in faith, they were in no position to claim it either. The perfection of which Paul speaks doesn't refer to outward perfection - something to which Americans have become addicted, but an inward obedience to the will of God.

A month ago I had the wheels aligned on the car. While visiting with the mechanic, I learned that mis-aligned wheels can very quickly wear out a brand-new set of tires. The same can be said of our alignment with the will of God - being mis-aligned will wear us out faster than anything. So, how do we get ourselves into alignment?

Paul tells us to remember that our citizenship is in heaven. Even though that sounds very other-worldly, Paul intends it to have earthly significance. Citizenship is about where we live - about the values, commitments, loyalties and allegiances that make us who we are.

When we cross the border of another country and hand the customs officer our passport we are revealing where we live, where we make our home, where we have come from and where we will return. I remember one time when I crossed the border from France into Spain how eager my wife, Ellie, was to get her passport stamped by a Spanish customs official, as a keepsake of our journey. I also remember her profound disappointment that the customs office at the border was closed when we drove across. She wanted a remembrance on her passport of where her family had come from.

Paul reminds the Philippians where they have come from. He reminds them and us that they are citizens of heaven. That citizenship in another realm, ruled by another king, unlike any king in this realm, makes all the difference when we deal with problems.

Someone who frequently travels abroad told me of an instance when there was a civil disturbance while he was in another country. The tour guide gathered his group in the hotel lobby and reassured them by saying, “Remember, you are American citizens. You are protected by the American government.” My friend said that was reassuring. But what was even more striking was when the guide said, “Remember also that you must behave like citizens from a law-abiding democracy.”

With the turmoil that has afflicted our country the last 17 years, and our system of laws and checks and balances being challenged, most of us are wondering how our citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven intersects with our citizenship in the United States.

Back when I was in elementary school, we were graded on a lot of things, one of them being citizenship. The definition of citizenship was essentially following the “golden rule,” treating others as I want to be treated. Being a good citizen meant treating others fairly and watching out for the good of everyone. In other words, “Don’t be selfish.”

I didn’t always get that right in school. I still sometimes fall short of selflessness, but it is still my goal as a follower of Jesus Christ. That is still a pretty good definition of what it means to be a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our other citizenship is in this country, whose defining character is in the constitution.

The preamble of the constitution says that there are five objectives of our government: “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” The interpretation of those objectives is being tested in real time as some cheer and others jeer the efforts to reorient our government in the name of efficiency and expediency. While I understand the need to curtail wastefulness and inefficiency, I worry that the most vulnerable among us will be less secure and more at risk as the most powerful among us define justice, tranquility, defense, welfare and liberty.

In recent years there has been an effort to meld our Christian theology with national ideology into what is called Christian Nationalism, which is an oxymoron, if ever there was one. Theologian N. T. Wright said this about Christian Nationalism: “Christian nationalism is impoverished as it seeks a kingdom without a cross. It pursues a victory without mercy. It acclaims God’s love of power rather than the power of God’s love.”

Jesus made it quite clear that to be his follower is to be a citizen of the kingdom of Heaven, which puts us in tension with political power. Politics is the way of the world, and as Christians we cannot ignore the way the world works, but we can influence politics with our Christ-centered values, urging care for those most at risk in society. Jesus’ ministry was to the last, the least and the lost, not to the first, the most and the established.

Scripture frequently calls us to protect widows and orphans as symbols of those most at risk in society. As citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven we have an allegiance that outweighs our self-serving nature. We are certainly loyal to our country, but our true identity lies in our discipleship. That is intended to make all

the difference in how we behave, whether it's in the privacy of our home or exercising our civic responsibility.

As followers of Jesus Christ, our commitment to loving God and loving others should influence our civic lives. Our faith should guide our view of how a government should function. Our government should reflect our highest ideals which are embodied in the teaching and ministry of Jesus.

The world in which we live promotes certain images of success, power and fulfillment that are at odds with the images we get here on Sundays. The world expects us to put ourselves first; Jesus expects us to put others first. The world disdains empathy. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. The world treats foreigners as burdens or threats. Jesus was himself an immigrant fleeing oppression. The world adores power and might. Jesus' power comes in compassion. The way of the world is conquest. The way of Jesus is the cross. The cross, which is front and center here, reminds us that we are citizens of another realm.

There is powerful freedom in knowing where we are from, where our true land lies, and where we are destined to be when all is said and done. When we travel to another land, we have to have our passport to verify who we are.

In many ways as followers of Jesus we are strangers in a strange land in need of a passport to verify and remind us who we are and whose we are. This morning I'm giving you a Christian passport as evidence of who you are and where your citizenship lies. It's a reminder that we are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, where Jesus is our king and we are his willing servants.

*(Ushers distribute "Christian Passports")*

Being a citizen of the realm of heaven makes all the difference for how we live in this one – and if it doesn't, it should. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen