

Citizenship in Heaven  
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Millions of America citizens were neither born in the United States nor have even one parent who is a United States citizen. They are Americans because they have chosen to become citizens of the U.S. by naturalization. In fiscal year 2015, 729,995 people were naturalized. I have heard that the ceremonies when oaths of allegiance are taken are quite moving. As part of the process leading up to the oath, they have to document:

1. A period of continuous residence and physical presence in the United States;
2. An ability to read, write, and speak English;
3. Attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution;
4. Knowledge and understanding of U.S. history and government;
5. Good moral character; and,
6. Favorable disposition toward the United States.

This naturalization process holds challenges. At the interview, most applicants are required to answer questions about their applications and background in English, as well as pass an English and civics exam. The pass rate among applicants nationwide was 91 percent in 2013, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. But in 2012, the Center for the Study of the American Dream estimated that one in three current American citizens would fail the test. Personally, I wonder how you would even test the moral character and favorable dispositions of any of us – that's not a fill-in-the-blank sort of process.

So much for our civics lesson today. I bring this all up, of course, because I have been thinking about what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. "Our citizenship is in heaven," he wrote in chapter 3, verse 20. It is an interesting turn of phrase that makes sense in the context of the time. Philippi was a Greek city in Macedonia that was colonized by Rome. The emperor Augustus settled retired Roman soldiers there, so it became a miniature Rome, full of Roman citizens who were not originally locals. In the time of Paul, a couple of generations later, citizens of Philippi enjoyed all the rights and privileges of Roman citizenship, just as if they had been born in the capital of the empire itself. They were proud of this. They spoke the Romans' language, they copied the Romans' architecture, and they dressed the way the Romans dressed. They knew that it defined their lives to be shaped by a empire of which they were citizens but in which they did not presently live.

Meanwhile, Paul himself was an interesting cosmopolitan figure. He was born in another city whose inhabitants were made Roman citizens: Tarsus, in southern Turkey. But he proudly states elsewhere that he was "a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee." Then he had an education in the language and concepts of Greek philosophy. He was clearly at home with aspects of Greek culture like competitive foot races. In other words, he had multiple influences, multiple identities, multiple allegiances. As a

young man, he underwent a religious experience that threw all that into chaos, and he became a follower of Christ. Paul was a complicated man.

He might almost have been echoing Plato in today's passage. In book nine of the Republic, Plato wrote of an imaginary city:

*"In heaven.... there is laid up a pattern of it...which he who desires may behold, and beholding, may set his own house in order. But whether such an one exists, or ever will exist in fact, is no matter; for he will live after the manner of that city, having nothing to do with any other."*

Paul was talking about just such a concept. "Our citizenship is in heaven" so we are living after the manner of an ideal place.

But living after this manner can get you into trouble. Paul was in a Roman prison when he wrote this letter. Paul's Roman citizenship was not a "get out of jail free" card. Throughout his ministry, Paul was locked up repeatedly, even though his supporters had likely paid the jailers enough bribes to keep him fed and to buy him the privilege of writing to the various churches he had planted across Greece and Asia Minor. And as we know, Paul eventually was executed by the Empire during his final imprisonment in Rome. So in many ways, when Paul became a Christian, he became a refugee – on the run from those who were paid to enforce the laws of the Empire. Why would he so happily renounce his perfectly good Roman citizenship for this other kind?

Apparently, he had found something better. He had found freedom and forgiveness and a sort of intimacy with the risen Christ. He had found a calling to share the freedom and forgiveness with others, like his brothers and sisters in Philippi. He had been transformed from an angry persecutor of Christians into someone who wrote movingly of "the peace of Christ, which surpasses all understanding." He had been through a naturalization process, accepted as a fellow citizen, one who prayed that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

At times, Paul became extremely frustrated with those who would withhold heavenly citizenship by what he considered an outmoded documentation process. To his mind, Jesus had revamped the rules. The laws of exclusion - the walls erected to keep "us" in and "them" out – were not only unnecessary, they were harmful.

In some ways, Paul's teaching and preaching were based on his own experience and interpretation of a mystical conversion. Writing in his letters 30 years after the time of Jesus, he never told stories about the life of Christ. But some themes resonate so well with what Luke records. Jesus also acted out a new standard for belonging that did away with old systems of documentation. In some ways, though an ultimate insider, Jesus lived as a refugee. And he recognized other refugees when he saw them. He wanted to invite them into citizenship. And, so often, he did this around a dining room table.

Wandering around in Galilee, teaching and healing, Jesus meets Levi. This name is almost ironic: named for the priestly tribe of holy men, this Levi was a low life scum, not fit to even enter the Temple, somewhere between a crooked IRS agent and a mafia thug. Jesus looks intently at him, sees him for who he is, and says, "Follow." He does not check on language skills, moral character, or favorable disposition. Just, "Follow." Next scene: a great banquet.

Banquets and dining room tables have an important place in the Gospel of Luke. Kind of like the middle school cafeteria, banquet tables in first century Middle Eastern culture was the place

where social rules were deeply entrenched. Sit in the wrong place, eat with the wrong people, and your social standing could be ruined. It was guilt by association. Looking at the seating arrangement of any meal in those days would tell you who had the power...and who didn't. Just like a middle school cafeteria.

Jesus, in his usual not-so-subtle way, used the table to redefine social rules and social power. He ate with tax collectors and other low life. He even ate with Pharisees. In his table practices, Jesus actively illustrated the new commonwealth of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is a place where we eat with and live with people outside of social norms. The table isn't a place of status...it is a place of fellowship and kinship...which means that anyone with whom you eat—anyone—becomes family, a fellow citizen.

Jesus came into the world to turn people back towards God, and towards each other within the new freedom of the kingdom of God. Jesus was fully aware that the kind of change he was bringing to the world was not easy. It ruffles feathers. It looks extravagant. He used parables about trying to fix an old garment with a new patch, or fill old wineskins with new wine. Our old norms don't fit. Some conventions and traditions will need to be set aside. When tax collectors leave everything to become citizens, when refugees who have lost everything come looking for a new home, when justice is brought to people who do not have it, it may mean that there is cost for others. They may not be willing to pay the cost. All of this can lead to argument, anger, pain and division.

Though both Jesus and Paul talked about heavenly realities, they refused to ignore the very earthly injustices right in front of them. In fact, allegiance to the heavenly reality changes the heart, so that the pain and injustice in our world are thrown into higher relief. Our citizenship in heaven gives us both rights and responsibilities. There is no test to pass, but we are daily asked by the world:

Are you attached to the principles of your faith's founder?

Do you have knowledge and understanding of our spiritual history and governance?

What about your moral character?

Do you have a favorable disposition to the Kingdom of God and those in it?

We are asked daily by the joys and sorrows we see in others to profess and display allegiance to a heavenly commonwealth. And the only way to do this is to copy Jesus: to welcome the outcast and eat with them; to take pity on the helpless and include them; to heal broken relationships and to express the joy of our calling into community. The paradox is that this breaks down walls and borders. We can practice these civic duties in any setting, in any country. We are not limited by the ancient categories or old garments or wineskins. We are free when we give other people freedom.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is marked by its joy and its expressions of love. Frankly, we do not find this in all of Paul's writings. But somehow he had developed a bond with these people that distance could not break. They were *sympatico*. Just thinking about them, there in his prison, inspired Paul to burst out with "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!" This is one of the perks of heavenly citizenship: this blend of joy and freedom and love; this desire for a larger inclusion; this ability to weather hardship with grace. What other allegiance offers us such power? What other citizenship makes us so free?

I sometimes like to end a sermon with a poem. This week, a song came to my mind from the musical Chess. It is sung by a person living within a dictatorship, who refuses to let his heart be enslaved. It is called Anthem:

No man, no madness  
Though their sad power may prevail  
Can possess, conquer, my country's heart  
They rise to fail  
She is eternal  
Long before nations' lines were drawn  
When no flags flew, when no armies stood  
My land was born

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And you wonder will I leave her - but how?  
I cross over borders but I'm still there now

How can I leave her?  
Where would I start?  
Let man's petty nations tear themselves apart  
My land's only borders lie around my heart.

Amen.