

Our Citizenship

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.

Our Citizenship

Philippians 3:17-4:1

March 13, 2022
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I.

This morning's Scripture reading from Philippians 3 provides us an excellent opportunity to explore the notion of "Citizenship" which, of course, is quite germane owing to the events now unfolding in the nation of Ukraine as it defends itself against invasion from neighboring Russia; but, also in consideration of the social and political climate currently at work in our own nation. Today's sermon will begin with something of a civics lesson, then go off the rails all together before, eventually, we get back on track. Buckle Up.

Defined most simply, "Citizenship" is "membership in a community. However, the nature and scope of such "membership" and the associated "community" within which such members exist is something we'll need to explore today; not only with respect to earthly realms but, moreover, with an eye to theological and spiritual realms as well.

II.

Before we begin, please be aware I'm endeavoring mightily to not get too far down into the weeds. However, this is a very important topic; not only to our faith as the followers of Christ, but also as it regards our life together in this nation to which we belong.

The concept of citizenship is composed of three main elements. The first is citizenship as *legal* status, defined by civil, political and social rights. Here, the citizen is a legal person who is free to act according to the law with the right to claim the law's protection. The second is citizen specifically as a *political agent*, actively participating in a society's political institutions. The third understands citizenship as membership in a *political community* which serves as a distinct source of identity; both individual identity and collective, and how the two integrate socially.

III.

Historically, citizenship has been understood to fall within two philosophical models: republican or liberal; that's with a small "r" and a small "l". The republican model can be traced back to Aristotle and flows through Machiavelli and Rousseau, among others; with manifestations in Athenian democracy and Republican Rome, as well as the Italian city-states and workers' councils. The key principle of the republican model is civic self-rule, and understands the citizen as one capable of ruling and being ruled in turn. Active participation in the processes of deliberation and decision-making ensures that individuals are citizens, not subjects. In essence, the republican model emphasizes the second element of citizenship, that of political agency.

IV.

The liberal model traces its origins to the Roman *Empire* and early-modern reflections on Roman law. As the empire expanded, citizenship rights became extended to conquered peoples, transforming the meaning of the concept. Citizenship meant being *protected* by the law rather than necessarily *participating* in its formulation or execution. Citizenship became an important but only occasional identity; a legal status rather than a fact of everyday life. In the liberal model, the focus is on the first of our three elements: citizenship is primarily understood as a legal status rather than as a political office. Hence, it denotes membership in a community of shared or common law, which may or may not be identical with a geographical community; where the legal dimension of citizenship is potentially ever-inclusive and indefinitely expandable. Which is what we see at the heart of the current debate over Immigration.

V.

The liberal model, which developed from the 17th century onwards, understands citizenship primarily as a legal status: political liberty is important as a means to protecting individual freedoms from interference by other individuals or the authorities themselves. However, citizens exercise these freedoms primarily in the world of private associations and attachments, rather than in the political domain.

Of course, citizenship never falls neatly into one of these two models: the republican emphasizing the public dimension of life, while the liberal emphasizes the private. In fact, rather than understanding these as two models as opposing; it would be more reasonable to see them as complementary.

VI.

Whereas this may be a deeper dive than most would like, I would argue that understanding these two models goes a long way to helping us to make sense of what has transpired in our own nation, and the root of many of the tensions and much of the divisions which have beset us. Though perhaps overly generalized and too simplistic, during the course of the last two centuries our country had been moving from a republican model of citizenship to a liberal. Rather than taking the best of both, however, we seem to have inherited the worst of each.

Essentially, at our nation's inception only property owners, necessarily white men, were afforded the right to vote and given the rights of full citizenship to constitute a government of such people, by only these people, and on the behalf of others who weren't "people" in a legal sense. Over time, these "others," many of whom began as property, or were treated as such, strove and struggled for full citizenship as part of emancipation and suffrage; a process which is still on-going today.

VII.

Now, *never* in a million years did I think I would *ever* share the following song with you in a worship context. To be perfectly frank, I am feeling a *great* deal of trepidation about doing so; not out of fear of criticism (though there is that) but, rather, about the *necessity* of doing so. Nevertheless, the lyrics *perfectly* express all the various nuances of this movement from republic to liberal citizenship, and the resulting stereotypes we now have for those "on the other side"; regardless of which side that may be. It's a song by Todd Snider, a fairly risqué but clearly a satirical view of what has become the two perceived poles of our democracy.

*Conservative Christian, right-wing Republican,
straight white, American males.*

*Gay bashing, black fearing, poor fighting,
tree killing, regional leaders of sales.*

*Frat housing, keg tapping, shirt tucking,
back slapping, haters of hippies like me.*

*Tree hugging, peace loving, pot smoking,
tube watching, lazy arse hippies like me.*

*Tree hugging, love making, pro choicing, gay wedding,
Wide Spread Panic digging hippies like me.*

*Skin color blinded, conspiracy minded,
protesters of corporate greed.*

*We who have nothing and most likely will, t
ill we all end up locked up in jails*

*By conservative Christian, right-wing Republican,
straight white American males.*

*Diamonds and dogs, boys and girls living together in two separate worlds.
Following leaders up mountains of shame, look to each other to find who blame.
I know who me and my burned out buddies we always like to blame...*

*Conservative christian, right wing republican,
straight white. American males.*

*Soul saving, flag waving, Rush loving,
land paving, personal friends to the Quales.*

*Quite diligently, working so hard to keep,
the free reigns of this democracy*

*From tree hugging, peace loving, pot smoking,
bare footing, folk-singing hippies like me.*

XIII.

Now, I'm just spit-balling here, but in terms of our particular nation, I think that republican citizenship began to crescendo with the national response to the Great Depression and reached its full zenith with WWII. Simply put, the center of our society held; moreover, it was strengthened.

The Vietnam War and the tumultuous changes of the 1960s and 1970's began to turn the tide toward liberal citizenship; we recognized, correctly, that there are a plurality of centers within our one society. Since then, however, it has been a race to ask not what I can do for my country, but what can my country do for *me?!?*

Such that, these days it seems, the *greatest* common denominator we share is that everything should be about ensuring the *lowest* common denominator. Chiefly, and across the *entire* political spectrum, citizenship is now characterized by how we can exercise our freedoms within our own *private* associations; it is a mere legal status rather than a fact of everyday life lived in community. We've become a circular firing squad.

IX.

Witnessing all of this in American society, I can't imagine the Apostle Paul would be in anyway shocked by the exponential growth of the truth of his statement: "Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things."

Whereas Paul, in his dualist worldview grounded in Platonic thinking, was claiming the spiritual over the material, these days the spiritual, let alone *any* form of higher value or virtue, doesn't even get to take the field. Now it's all about, "What's in it for me?" with no sense whatsoever of any greater good or shared ideals. Citizenship has become wholly transactional; what can the individual gain from the community?

Which is why the claim Paul places upon the church at Phillipi is even more relevant to us today: "But our citizenship is in *heaven*, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

X.

If we wish to fully appreciate Lent so as to truly comprehend Easter, we must join in Paul's understanding of what Jesus meant when he said (in Matthew 5:7): "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them."

Whereas citizens of the material world seek protection *under* the law, citizens of heaven find protection through the *fulfillment* of the law accomplished on the cross of Christ and the atonement for sin it provides. While our heavenly citizenship is, also, wholly transactional, the transaction runs in the *opposite* direction: with the community gaining everything through the individual; specifically, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we expect even now. In such a citizenship we find not our rights, but our hope.

XI.

As citizens of Christ's Kingdom, we have "legal" status as the children of God; not just protected, but beloved as well. Given this, we can claim the right of living within the non-geographical bounds of God's redemptive love. Having been redeemed, we now have both the privilege and the spiritual agency of freely and actively participating in God's unfolding plan for the world; and God's plan for our own lives as well.

Moreover, citizenship in, and membership of, such a spiritual community serves as *the* distinct source of our identity; both individually, as believers, and collectively, as a church and body of Christ. All that remains now, particularly in the season of Lent, is for us to socially integrate our citizenship in heaven with our life here on earth as...

*Compassionate Christians, angel-winged citizens,
straight talkin', hearty and hale.
Hate smashing, soul stirring, poor saving,
Lord willing, treading the spiritual trail.
God's housing, mote missing, beam plucking,
love wrapping, haters of hypocrisy.
We're hug giving, peace making, invoking and stoking
the grace of this community. Amen.*