

“Honoring Our Primary Citizenship”
Philippians 3:17–4:1
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We live in a time when there is a lot of conversation about citizenship, who is and is not a citizen, and how to respond to the influx of immigrants and refugees. With unprecedented global migration, it is not just an American challenge. It is one all nations face, and there is a need to balance our desire to extend compassion with security concerns, alongside the question of how many people any country can embrace.

But we also encounter a lot of misinformation, half-truths, and lies about immigrants, much of it generated to gain power by playing to our worst instincts and taking advantage of the fact that citizenship is a subject that stirs strong emotions. We care about our national identity and want to protect what we deem to be good and noble about America, but part of what is good and noble is our willingness to embrace people from around the world. Emma Lazarus’ words on the Statue of Liberty say, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.” They are words of welcome, not rejection.

I have shared with some of you the story of how my father of nurture became an American citizen. He was from Devon, England, was in the SAS and had spent a decade as an operative in the Middle East. He came to the U.S. to train troops for anti-guerilla warfare in Viet Nam but became frustrated with the incongruence between stated purposes and methodologies in that war and decided to leave military service, move here, and marry my mother. He did, after doing a mercenary job for King Faisal of Saudia Arabia, we moved to Miami for him to do an MBA, and there he began the process of becoming an American citizen.

This should have assured my grandmother in Lincolnton that we were going to stay here. She worried that he was going to take us to England, even told my mother as she was walking down the aisle, “I’ll take you back anytime!” But she never really forgave him for refusing to eat the grits she cooked, saying, “In England we feed this to cows.”

It was not a smart move, particularly given what he ate in the Middle East, but he appreciated the wonderful qualities of this nation, just not grits, and he never considered returning to England to live.

Citizenship is a precious thing, something many seek, and something we are willing to defend passionately. Yet, amidst all the passionate conversation these days, many Christians have forgotten something important. Our citizenship is not of this world, or at least we are dual citizens, and our loyalty to any earthly realm must come in a distant second to our primary loyalty. We are citizens of heaven, according to the Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Philippi, and thus, our first loyalty is to this realm and the God who rules it in love.

Paul urges the Philippians to join in imitating him. This may seem arrogant, but what he means is — be like him in trying to follow Jesus, by living a life of self-giving love, and he is doing a pretty good job of this. He writes this letter from prison. His faithfulness knows no limits; it gets him into trouble. This is what he wants the Philippians to emulate.

He says that many live as enemies of the cross with their bellies serving as gods and their minds on earthly things. We don't know whether he is talking about specific sins related to eating or speaking in a more general sense wherein "the belly" is a metaphor for many earthly things. Either way, he is talking about the world's ways as opposed to God's ways, earthly values as opposed to heavenly values. He wants his readers to choose the latter and to drive this point home, he says this. "But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul wants the Philippians to take seriously the calling to follow Jesus in the way of the cross and to do so, they must realize it is not a matter of having a few different ideas or making minor adjustments. It is a radical reorientation of life wherein the Jesus ways replace their normal ways. They live in Philippi and are loyal to their city and the Empire of which it is a part, but they are citizens of heaven, and that is where their ultimate loyalties lie. Remember this, Paul says, stand firm in the Lord, be transformed into a life of sacrificial service and love.

We may think Paul is writing to people in a different context and thus the focus on citizenship doesn't translate. He is writing to people whose competing loyalty is to the Roman Empire, an enemy of Christ, whereas our

competing loyalty would be to America, a friend to Christ. But both assumptions are flawed.

First, while the Roman Empire is often hostile to early Christians, Philippi is a Roman Colony with special status and it is located on a significant trade route. The people who live there are proud of their standing and thus do not view Roman citizenship as a negative thing. The little church to which Paul writes will experience tension, but Roman citizenship is not yet the clear-cut negative we might think it is. So, the very idea that their true citizenship lies elsewhere is jolting.

Second, the idea that we live in a Christian nation is fundamentally flawed. We have many Judeo-Christian influences here, and we have freedoms that have allowed Christian faith to flourish, but the founders were adamant in insisting that no religion would be established as *the* religion of this nation. The First Amendment says so explicitly, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...” Furthermore, the idea that America is the new Israel through which the world will be saved flies in the face of the claim that after trying to work through one nation, God chose a new way to save the world — the way of Jesus, a way for all nations.

Our context is different than that of people living in Philippi in the first century, but, like them, we are jolted by this calling to consider the privileges and responsibilities of our primary citizenship, and, like them, we need to embrace this calling. We should never downplay the blessings we have in this nation, nor do we need to adopt a “Christ against culture” perspective. But we do need to acknowledge that no nation equals the beloved community and remember that we are citizens of heaven. If we are to honor our primary citizenship, our baptism in Christ, we must seek something different than what we see around us.

It might begin with viewing people who are not from this land with the dignity and respect they deserve as our sisters and brothers in the human family and the body of Christ. The church is global, God’s concern is global, we are called to make disciples of all nations. And we are told repeatedly in scripture to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, in our land. We have numerous, compelling reasons to treat those from other lands with dignity and respect.

Do we not? Not consistently. I think of a Muslim woman who told a group of us at an interfaith meeting how she was shoved by a woman in line at a Walmart in Raleigh because she took one look at her and realized she wasn't from here; even worse in the woman's eyes, she was Muslim. Thankfully several people quickly moved in between her and the woman, protecting her. So, there is something hopeful there. They were putting themselves on the line for her, a stranger in every sense of the word. But why must there be hostility and meanness?

I think also of a member of our church who is not from this country, and her spouse who is from yet a different country. At another store in our area, a stranger took one look at her and her daughters and said with disgust. "Where did you get them?" They were mixed-race and she didn't look like she was from here. So, she deserved no respect. She told this painful story several years ago at a Centerpoint program. I'd like to think things have changed, but with all the nasty rhetoric in national life, I doubt it. One has to wonder who some evangelicals have in mind when they get teary-eyed talking about sending out missionaries to save the lost in foreign lands. Jesus loves them over there, but to you-know-where with them if they come here?!

But not all the stories are negative. This church extends compassion to the stranger in our land in numerous ways — through our clothing ministry, the food truck, the Welcome House ministry of the Wyatts and CBF, and our worship and teaching. We have church members from Japan, Germany, Colombia, Nigeria, Russia, Pakistan, France, Belgium, Ghana, Ecuador, and the list goes on and on with visitors from China, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan. We even welcome people from Texas and Alabama... But the point is we view the human family as our family, because God does. Our primary citizenship in heaven calls for a different response than we see in the world around us.

But another way, the most basic way we seek to honor our primary citizenship in heaven is by living in the way of the cross. It is a different way, radically different, giving up self-interest for the benefit of others, and overcoming evil not with force but with love.

Paul has strong words for those who live as enemies of the cross, but he does not seek vengeance against them. He thinks of them with tears. In like manner, in the reading from Luke, when Jesus confronts opposition from

Herod, some religious leaders, and some of his own people in Jerusalem, he does not seek vengeance but rather laments their condition, wishing he could shelter them as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings. In the end, he will die for them.

Someone has suggested that Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* is a Christ figure. He is a humble hobbit, not a warrior, and he does not seek to defeat the evil Sauron by using his ring against him, though he is tempted to do so. He defeats him by destroying the ring, with help from an unlikely character who may also be a Christ figure in a strange kind of way. That is the way of the cross, Jesus' way and ours, conquering evil not by force but through humility and sacrifice. It's not always about laying down life but it does involve giving up self-interest to help others.

In a recent issue of *Plough* (Spring 2025, pp. 68-69) Stephanie Saldaña writes about her experience living in the Holy Land with her family in this time of war, violence, and displacement. She had sought to read the Gospels and her life in the light of the resurrection. Now she is learning to read through the light of the crucifixion. Jesus underscores his teaching by what he does on the cross, she says. *Love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, turn the other cheek, love your neighbor as yourself.*

This is the way of the cross, Saldaña says, and it provides not only solace but also a miracle. Seeing him, she wants to live like him, extend more compassion. "To offer to lift someone else's heavy bags. To open a door. To bandage a wound. To smile. To call someone by name. To place one's head at the foot of a child's bed after an exhausting day and sing a lullaby." The urge comes to love not only in response to violence but as an end in and of itself, knowing God loves with us. She says she can see those around her, living with this kindness against gravity, day after day, largely unnoticed, and she recognizes the miracle in it.

It is a miracle that anyone lives this way, the way of the cross, right now, but it is a miracle that is needed desperately, and it is our calling to do so as followers of Jesus and citizens of heaven.