

2 Lent Year C March 16 2025

Citizens of the Kingdom

Philippians 3:17-4:1

As Paul formed churches throughout his ministry, he had a special fondness for the church in the city of Philippi. People are likely to be familiar with a quote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" which is found in Philippians 4:13. It is quite popular with athletic competitors to stir great achievement. I always found how this quote is used is not aligned in which it was written. It was meant to inspire great action, yet it was penned when Paul was at his worst, he was in prison.

Paul was a Roman citizen; therefore, he had certain legal rights within the Empire. He also considered himself a citizen of God's kingdom which meant for him that he had to act in a certain way. There were times when Paul's dual citizenship conflicted with others. However, the trouble that Paul had was not always with Rome, but with people who opposed his message of the Gospel. Paul worked hard to build others up so that they could be ushering in the Kingdom of God for all humanity. Paul found himself having to confront others who sought to discredit his message as they to protect the institution of the Jewish religious background.

Paul understood that for him to join with Jesus, he had to shed his old nature and to embrace the newer self. This process of transformation was one of letting go of Roman's social standards of proper conduct and to embrace the action of advocating for those who had no rights in the Roman Empire. Paul's new self also encountered a struggle for him to carry out in his old religious environment.

As Paul surrendered to God's calling on his life, Paul paid a price of imprisonment, slander, and rejection. Even during these intense periods of disappointments and betrayals, Paul kept his trust and faith in God and his fellow followers of Christ.

Paul encouraged others to do their best for the Kingdom of God. Paul didn't have the Gospels for others to read and preach, but he did have his own life to offer as a model of what it means to have Jesus as one's king. Paul strongly encouraged people to imitate him as they sought to live their lives as new people through their baptism in Jesus. He offered an open invitation for others to join with him in his hope in Jesus. This solicitation was more than words; it was about action.

Paul wanted it to be clear that not everyone would be excited about what they were doing. Paul worked to strengthen the church's resolve to remain faithful, for human organizations and institutions will pass way, but their identity in Jesus is eternal.

Others often took offense at how well the young church was doing and considered its members to be outsiders of the Roman Empire. As far as the Roman Empire was concerned, this young church and its supporters were foreigners. Paul was clear that this misunderstanding was more than a strong disagreement, as the church was experiencing hostility. This tension between the Roman Empire and other Jews brought Paul grief, and he didn't want others to suffer or to inflict this suffering on others.

Paul's message addressing the tension in the early church is timely because it brings to focus our own struggles to follow Jesus and **still be in the world**. This is the purpose of Lent. Paul pointed out that we need to know what is being offered and what is the cost of being a follower of Christ. As we move toward the cross, we are also moving toward others in service and advocacy. This is the life of the cross.

Paul wrote saying that the Philippians' hope would not fail, for those in the church were citizens of God's kingdom. **In this kingdom citizens would have a different experience from those who are citizens of the world.** In God's kingdom the world's standards would be turned upside down. People of low status would be transformed. People previously regarded as nothing would be treated with dignity and honor. This hope in worldly promises would fail, **but God's kingdom is eternal.**

Pastor Mark Hopper from First Baptist Church in Bowling Green Kentucky has this for us to consider.

(quote) The life of the cross leads to a heavenly commonwealth. While the Philippians were proud of their status as citizens of Rome, Paul reminded them that there is a better citizenship to be had. There is a greater Lord than Caesar. This Lord is the crossbearer who is now glorified and eternal. Our hope for an eternal future with him is grounded in the call to be like him now in servanthood to others.

Cruciform living is the opposite of escapism. It is our active engagement in the suffering of the world as we empty ourselves and discover the scandal of a life never before imagined. This life points to something beyond all hope, that God is in control and will transform this life into something of a different kind altogether. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. Imitating Christ is never joyless drudgery. It is the confident hope that we shall be like him.

Lent demands a response to this hope while it invites deep reflection. **Are our lives cruciform or not?** Paul calls those who move toward the cross his "joy and crown" Philippians 4:1. We are asked to stand firm in the Lord. This is more than being in a secure place; it is being in a secure person. The pattern we imitate is nothing less than grace and peace. Thank God for Lent. **(end of quote)**

Today there is a strong focus on citizenship. We as a nation are concerned about making sure that our country is secure and safe. I ask, could we take the same level of intentionality of this issue and apply it to our walk with Christ? I think this is an effective approach to our Lenten season.

As we prioritize security of our national residency, why not apply similar dedication to our spiritual citizenship. This informed attitude can be very meaningful, especially during this liturgical season. Lent is a time for reflection, repentance, and renewal. By approaching this spiritual practice with the same seriousness of our status of being American citizens, we can deepen our own faith and commitment in God's kingdom.

We are dual citizens. We belong to various communities, and we are also members of God's kingdom. I know that being compassionate toward outsiders can be dangerous. We run the real risk of being misunderstood or even being rejected, either by the people whom we are serving and advocating OR by our own family and friends.

To be imitators of Jesus is dangerous. This does ask much of us. Yet is there a better or higher calling in our lives?

I have witnessed acts of mercy and compassion being extended to others from members of this congregation. I know that we can be caring and serving toward others. The bigger challenge we face today is can we make this way of seeing all people as blessed by God sustainable. I do believe we can.

We have many different roles in life. Most of us are citizens of the United States, and as such we are expected to act according to the rules and social expectations of this country.

However, we are also followers of Jesus and therefore citizens of another kingdom that has its own set of rules and expectations.

While the government's concerns about justice tend to focus on punishment, Jesus's sense of justice is one of restoring what has been broken.

Where the state uses tools of enforcement for compliance.

In God's kingdom uses mercy and grace to influence the peoples' attitudes and behaviors.

As we make the way to the cross a way of living our lives today, we know that it may be seen by others as folly. We are aware that walking in the way of the cross can be a burden to carry. But we don't go alone. We have Paul to whom was an imitator of Christ. We also have each other.

This is how we bring our faith alive.