

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
Philippians 1:27-30
6/20/2021

Politicizing Citizenship

Welcome to our second sermon on Philippians, which is happening around the same time as both father's day today and Juneteenth yesterday. Since I could not manage to cram these ideas into my sermon, let me begin by saying that a father can be many things, someone who cares for others, be they flesh and blood or a part of the church family. This morning I honor you. And Juneteenth is a great and wonderful independence day, when the last african american was freed from slavery after the civil war. Let us remember how things like the emancipation proclamation are important symbolic documents, but it only counts when people's lives are materially changed. So while we celebrate the symbolic meaning of Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday, let us remember that police brutality, wealth disparity, and mass incarceration still materially hurt our brothers and sisters.

Now, let me begin my sermon on Philippians by doing something strange. I'm going to say my own translation of Philippians 1:27-28, that I hope will give a clear interpretation of how Paul is really talking about citizenship and protecting the community, like a soldier protects the kingdom of God. These are all metaphors of loyalty and struggle, so I hope you can forgive Paul for his violent language.

Live your citizenship with loyalty to the Gospel of Christ. So that I know that you are standing resolute on the battlements of the kingdom of God with unity, struggling, striving, and fighting side by side with unity for the sake of the gospel. Do not be intimidated by the Romans, because when they think you are beaten, then you will have victory.

What does it feel like to be in a foreign land?

I know that we got a few missionaries among us, people who decided on purpose to dig themselves up from the soil that birthed them, to transplant themselves into a foreign land. And It is really hard for me to understand why people would do that. Because I am pretty sure I could not do this. Let me explain. When I was in college I spent a three month semester in the beautiful country of Peru. I spoke the language, attended classes on the country's history, and went to its magnificent tourist places like Cusco and Machu Picchu. But, I'm not sure what it is about my brain chemistry or culture shock, but those were some of the most stressful months of my life. I always felt so disoriented, had difficulty communicating, and never felt like I belonged. In a sense, it is true, I do not belong in Peru, both because that is not where God is calling me, but also because I am an estadounidense. Now we all know that this is more complicated than my story of privilege. People forsake their citizenship all the time to seek a better life in the United

States, ironically, because the United States installed brutal dictators in Central and South America for decades, destabilized the region by buying drugs and selling guns. But that is something for another sermon. The point is that when I went to another country, I felt a strong sense of culture shock that makes everything seem topsy turvy.

For Paul, being a citizen of the Gospel was a confrontational affair. This passage is not an example of the dual citizenship that we see in Acts. Here citizenship means loyalty to the gospel, it means standing up and suffering. This would have been a difficult thing for the church in Philippi, because Philippi is a Roman Colony, meaning it is full of Roman veterans and settlers who were supposed to stay loyal to their Roman citizenship. Paul is telling the church in Philippi that serving Christ is not going to be a cake walk, it's not going to lead to an easy life. In fact, it may even turn them against their neighbors. Because when they become citizens of the gospel, they will start speaking a different language, caring about different things, and turning their loyalty to the emperor into loyalty to God.

Paul is setting forth an alternative society with its own values and manner of life that does not match the wider Roman world. Instead of being loyal to the emperor, Christians are loyal to God. Instead of forming hierarchical patron/client relationships, Christians are unified in one spirit where the old social signifiers of woman, man, slave, free, jew, greek pass away. Instead of being worried about acquiring wealth, status, or even extending our own lives, the value of spreading the knowledge of Jesus is enough.

And I do not know if I can understate what Paul is asking them to do. Paul is using military language when talking about being a citizen of the gospel, like the Church of Philippi has become an enclave of the Kingdom of God, with its own wall and standing army. This may be Paul preparing these chusky Philippians for the persecution that was coming as they grew in numbers. It may be that Paul is worried that the Philippians saw themselves as part of the city of Philippi or Rome, instead of members of the kingdom of God. Ultimately Paul is asking his beloved church for loyalty to God through their politics, through the way they live their lives. Paul calls them into a politicized citizenship.

So what does it mean to be a citizen of the gospel on earth?

When I was growing up, I learned that I was supposed to be in the world, but not of it. Which I took to mean that I should care what happens in the world and engage in things like commerce in order to feed myself. But ultimately, the only thing worthy of my loyalty was God. In some ways, being Mennonite makes this easy. I reject loyalty to my nation state, by not joining the military or holding public office. This is a useful, if we want to hold ourselves to this promise, it is clear cut; however Paul is not telling us to forsake a particular career path, but change the way we live our lives. So this is an incomplete understanding of Paul's citizenship, but what if we

added the metaphor of culture shock. Like all metaphors, culture shock is an imperfect description of being a citizen of the gospel, but let's see where it takes us.

Like when I went to Peru, I experienced culture shock because the rules I grew up with no longer applied. Let us ask the wider questions about what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of God. How does this affect what we buy, what jobs we see as noble, who are we friends with? The citizens of America would answer, buy what is cheapest, even if that means it came from slave labor. That a job's salary is all that matters even if it means not paying your workers enough, that we should be friends only with people like us, of the same color skin and same socioeconomic class. But let me challenge you to re-write those rules, to see that being a citizen of the kingdom of God means changing how we live our lives. Being a citizen of the gospel is a political act. When we buy things, let it nourish our communities and the planet. When we get a job, may it be a job of healing rather than exploitation. When we make friends, let us do so without judgment.

Let us be counter-cultural citizens of the gospel, loyal to the kingdom of God and living our lives in accordance with the commandments to love our neighbor as ourselves.