

Philippians 3:17-4:1 “Citizens of Heaven or Earth?”

This week’s text is from my favorite letter that Paul wrote to the early churches. Most of his letters like Romans and 1 Corinthians are addressing *problems* that came up in the church, but Philippians is a letter of encouragement to a church that was getting it right. How do we *know* they were getting it right? Because all the “right” people were upset with them. It’s funny how sometimes you can get a better handle on how well you’re doing ministry by knowing who *doesn’t* like you. Think about that for a minute. If a group called, “The Brotherhood of Nazi Skinhead Klanspeople” *doesn’t* like you, there’s a good chance that you are doing some *great* ministry. And you can flip that around too. If a group called “The Loyal Noble Alliance of Whites Only Aryan Nationalists” think you’re doing a *great* job and give your church five stars on Google Reviews, something is seriously wrong, and you need to repent and come to Jesus.

Seriously though, Paul had a big heart for this church in Philippi. They were doing good ministry in that region, and as a result, they were being persecuted and humiliated. So Paul wrote this letter to encourage the church to keep on doing what they were doing. He said that Christ would, “Transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” And he used the idea of citizenship to help illustrate his point.

Now ... all of us here in this room are citizens. We are first and foremost citizens of the World. More specifically, we are citizens of the United States. Narrow that down a little more, and we can say that we are citizens of the state of California. Zoom in the map a little more, and we could be called citizens of Butte County too. What makes someone a citizen? Some of it has to do with the place you inhabit. But a lot of it has to do with our alliances. To whom do we belong? What are the privileges and benefits of being citizens? What do we owe in order to receive privileges, benefits and protection? That’s where it gets tricky, especially for the church in Philippi. On one hand, they were citizens of

the Roman Empire. The taxes they paid supported the perks and protections they received from Rome. But on the other hand, they were “citizens of heaven” too. And by referring to Jesus as “Lord,” they were declaring that they were under the reign of God. That presents a problem when you live in an Empire that expects a high degree of loyalty and devotion from its subjects. So Paul is trying to help the Philippians understand their “dual citizenship.” And he’s pretty blunt in his explanation too. The ones who are the enemies of Christ are headed for destruction. Their minds are only concerned about earthly things. They think that salvation comes from all the goodies and perks they get from being citizens of the Empire. But Paul says Jesus is their real savior. His power enables him to make all things subject to him. So if you want to avoid the kind of destruction that comes by putting all your trust in earthly kingdoms, stand firm in the Lord! In other words, “Yes ... you may be dual citizens, but remember which one counts!”

And so it is true for us. We are dual citizens as well. Yes, we’ve got to pay taxes ... we’ve got to “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” just like Jesus said, but as Christians, we have sworn our allegiance first and foremost to God’s reign. We call *Christ* “Lord and Savior,” not our elected leaders. But sometimes those lines between God’s Reign and Caesar’s Reign can get blurry. Our actions and reactions don’t always reflect our fidelity to Christ. Sometimes we get mixed up when we think that upholding Caesar’s law is synonymous with upholding God’s Law. In the Old Testament, that’s called “idolatry” at best and “blasphemy” at worst. The first commandment does *not* say, “You shall have no other god before me except when you agree more with that other ‘god.’”

So how do we live as citizens of both heaven and earth in today’s world? What do we do when we make a commitment to follow Christ, and then realize that there are some serious clashes in values between the two systems? That’s where the Christians in Philippi found themselves 2,000 years ago. The church had to do some serious soul searching when it came to figuring out how they were going to interact as minorities in a dominant culture. But that’s how it’s always been in the church. Where

does Christ fit into the dominant culture? How do we as Christ's followers act when the two cultures clash?

You know where the biggest test often takes place? During human tragedies. Let's take for example the two mosques that were attacked in Christchurch New Zealand the other day. The death toll as of 7:00 this morning is 50. Fifty souls murdered by anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim attackers who released an 87 page manifesto only minutes before the attack. How do we, as citizens of Heaven living under the reign of God, respond? H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book back in 1951 called, *Christ and Culture* addressing the very thing we're talking about this morning. How do those who proclaim to be citizens of Heaven interact with the powers and principalities of the Earth? Here are some examples of how we Christians have responded in the past and can perhaps respond now -

1.) We can say, "To heck with the rest of you, we're doing our own thing." We reject all things that can potentially compromise our loyalty to God. We form communities where only those who are like us can reside. We shun all political and social aspects of the dominant culture. We withdraw and let the world burn for all we care. A bunch of Muslims get shot in New Zealand? Not our monkey, not our circus, not our problem. We've got enough problems to deal with. These weren't even Christians. But even if they were, that's still not our problem. That's an "out there" problem. We are concerned only with matters that are "in here." Now, before you think that I'm just going to be listing a bunch of "bad examples," let me assure you, there are merits to each of these responses. Don't think that I haven't thought about going away somewhere and letting the world burn. Remember, I'm an INFJ on the Myers Briggs. This is appealing to me. But is it the best way to live as citizens of Heaven on Earth? Fine. What else do you have?

2.) How about this? We can just say, "Well, what do you expect? That's just the kind of world we live in. The best we can do is just offer our 'thoughts and prayers.'" A bunch of innocent people get shot? Someone bombs a building? What can we do about it anyway? Stuff like that

happens all the time. People are people. Evil is present in the world. Always has been, always will be. The world is just going to end someday anyway. Let's just pray that it happens quickly before too many people get hurt. Does that sound appealing?

3.) Here's one – We can track down every last one of those responsible for these senseless deaths and rain down holy justice on them. We are God's hands and feet in this world, and as such it is our holy duty to “Let justice roll down like waters” upon the enemies of God. I'm sorry, these attacks happened in a what? In a Mosque? Not a church? Never mind.

4.) I've got a good one here – We can still rain down holy justice on Gods' enemies ... but the way we'll do it is by going out there and forcing everyone to be God's *friends*! In fact, that's how we'll deal with this whole “citizens of earth versus citizens of heaven” thing. We'll go out there and take back that which is already God's in the first place, and we'll just bulldoze our way over anyone who has a problem with it. That'll show them God's love!

5.) Or ... or we can be agents of change. We can transform culture by modeling our lives after the one who we call “Lord and Savior.” We can resist evil and speak truth to power. We can shine light into dark places and expose evil for what it is. I can't remember if it was at Bible study Thursday night or Regional Board meeting yesterday, but I'm absolutely sure it was in Room 6 sometime this past week, but I was talking about some of my favorite Jesus parables. I like “The Parable of the Mustard Seed.” You can find it in three of the gospels – Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 13. Jesus used this parable as an example of what the Kingdom of God or the Reign of Heaven was like. Jesus said that even though the mustard seed is tiny, when it gets in the ground, it sprouts up and all of a sudden you have branches all over the place. It spreads far and fast, and pretty soon you've got birds nesting in it! I think if Jesus lived in the American Southeast, he'd say, “The Kingdom of God is like kudzu.” Or if he lived in Oregon, he'd say, “The Kingdom of God is

like blackberry bushes.” The point is that it’s an invasive plant. Once it’s in the ground it just takes off. It’s not destructive like a fire or a flood or a hurricane. It’s doesn’t destroy everything in its path. But it does change the landscape. You know it’s there. And pretty soon it’s everywhere.

So it is with God’s Kingdom. And in God’s Kingdom, the law is love. Love is stronger than hate. Love shines a light in dark places and eventually overcomes the darkness. Philip Gulley, a Quaker author whose books have been circulating around our church for several years once wrote, “God flies no flag but the banner of love, under which we all reside.” Are we citizens of the world? Yes we are. For better or for worse, we are citizens of Earth. But we are also citizens under God’s reign too. And when we face tragedies like we did this past week, whether it’s in our own homeland or somewhere across the sea, when evil tries to cast a dark shadow, we will be there with God’s light saying, “No. Darkness cannot overcome God’s light. Yes, we offer our ‘thoughts and prayers,’ but along with that, we offer our love and support, we offer our resources, we offer our commitment to stand by our brothers and sisters regardless of their faith or ethnicity or nationality. In this way, we stand firm in the Lord, our ruler and savior. Amen.