

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 29: 4-11
SECOND LESSON: Philippians: 3:17-21; 4:1
July 4, 2021

“A Higher Citizenship”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

When my earliest American ancestors came to this country there was no nation here. They arrived on the Little Anne in 1623, the third ship after the Mayflower. There wasn't much here at the time, and life was always on the brink of extinction. And while these arrogant newcomers considered themselves civilized, the native peoples who encountered them thought them very strange indeed. The men had hair growing on their faces. Native American men do not have facial hair. And all of these interlopers stank to high heaven, because they insisted on wearing heavy wool clothing year-round and did not bath very often!

When my Scots Irish ancestors arrived in the 1700s there were no citizenship tests. They were all British subjects. The Scots-Irish were poor Scots who moved to Northern Ireland with the promise of land and wealth (at the expense of the native Irish of course). The ones who didn't find their fortune there moved on to America. Then came more Scots direct from Scotland this time, and more English, some Germans and a host of others. A lot of my ancestors participated in the very un-citizenship-like behavior of rebellion. If I had the slightest inclination to join, I do qualify for membership in the “Daughters of the American Revolution.”

The dirt poor starving Irish Catholic line of my family arrived in the 1840s. I can't even find out what ship they were on. Do you have any idea how many Thomas and Catherine Farrells there were? Illiterate, poor and starving, no one required a citizenship test of them. They weren't particularly welcome but they weren't kicked out either. The United States was a country, but no one had to do anything formal to become part of it. And when the Swedes, the last group of my line to arrive at the turn of the 20th century came the only thing my great grandfather had to do was go to the local court and apply for naturalization. While some restrictions upon entry had begun in the 1890s my great grandfather, great grandmother and their five children were accepted without question. And my great grandmother never did learn how to speak English. It was not until after the first world war that uniform legal exclusions and quotas began to be rigorously applied.

And today we have ICE. How many of us would not be sitting here today if the same standards applied now as then? I know those Irish Farrells wouldn't have made it! And as for my Swedish great-grandmother who couldn't speak English . . .?

Despite our more open past, Americans did not welcome all comers either. The Chinese were very specifically excluded from becoming citizens. And for centuries African Americans were not only not citizens, they were property. Native Americans were not given citizenship **until 1924**, and they were still prohibited from voting in many states. And we imprisoned and confiscated the homes and businesses of citizens of Japanese descent during World War II. We have high ideals, but we do not always live up to them.

What does citizenship mean? Philippi was a proud Roman colony full of Roman citizens. Roman citizenship at that point in history was a prize, not a universal possession. The majority of those living in the Empire were actually not Roman citizens. Citizenship carried with it certain privileges. Paul was a Roman citizen, and he used that fact to his advantage. Jesus was not a Roman citizen. Jesus was a person without any legally protected rights living in a conquered land. But when writing to the Philippians Paul uses his Roman citizenship and the citizenship of those to whom he writes to make a point. **Our primary citizenship is in heaven.** While we all have earthly needs and responsibilities, as Christians we have a higher set of obligations.

Citizenship gives us privileges, but it also brings responsibilities. We have to obey laws and pay taxes. We serve on juries and in the military. We VOTE, a critical and often neglected responsibility. As Americans we have the right to gather to protest policies we object to. We have freedom of speech. We have freedom of the press. Not every nation has these things. And we have a system of government that in many ways was designed by Christians who knew full well that people can't be trusted. That is why check and balances were put in, and why we must resist with all our might when these checks and balances are overridden. As much as we think America might be founded on optimism, it was really founded on the recognition of human sinfulness.

The problem is, in much of contemporary American society we have created a merger between patriotism and Christianity. We don't understand that we have dual nationality. To be a patriot and a Christian is seen as the same thing. And separating nationalism and patriotism from our Christian faith is difficult for most Americans because the two have been woven together in numerous public ways. We don't question the fact that there is an American flag in our sanctuary. But Christians from other nations find it odd. It was one of the first things I noticed when I came back to this country after living abroad for twelve years. We have a lot of what is called "civil religion" in our nation. Prayers are part of public events. There are chaplains in the military and government. We expect our presidents to have faith—preferably Christian faith. We agree to turn a blind eye when their practice of faith is only for show. We're told repeatedly that our founding fathers were Christians. America, we hear again and again, is a Christian nation. And the unspoken inference is America cannot be questioned or criticized because that would be tantamount to criticizing God.

Today is the 4th of July. It is a day for patriotism. And it is appropriate for Christians to want the best for the nation we are a part of and to see it prosper. The prophet Jeremiah encouraged the Israelites in exile in Babylon to build houses and settle down, plant gardens, have families and seek the peace

and prosperity of the city in which they lived. They were told to pray for their new land because when it prospered, they would prosper. It is the duty of God's children to seek peace and stability wherever they live. But loving our country is not the same thing as blind idolatry. There are times when being a citizen of heaven and being a citizen of a nation will come into conflict. We have no trouble seeing this where other nations are concerned. We don't question the morality of Christians in Nazi Germany or China or North Korea for resisting their political leaders in the name of justice. But we have a blind spot when it comes to ourselves. We ignore the fact that scripture conflicts with our national policies in countless ways.

- We are to welcome the foreigner and help them find safe haven.
- We ban them and seek to deport as many people as possible.
- We are to work for peace.
- We spend billions on weapons of war and use them.
- We are to care for the poor.
- We judge them and deny benefits wherever possible.
- We are to care for our planet.
- We allow powerful corporations and political interests to dictate our actions and widespread damage to the planet continues.
- We are to love people of all nations.
- We cry America first.

And how do we respond when asked about the discrepancy between our personal faith and national actions? After hemming and hawing for awhile we say that the Christian response is just not politically practical. **Think about that for a moment!**

Our primary loyalty should always be to Christ. The fact is that governments and people around the entire world, including our own, do wrong things. They make mistakes. They are not always just. And pretending it is not so will not make it not so. My school history books were notorious for omitting grave injustices and crimes. I never learned about Jim Crow or lynchings, the Trail of Tears, or Japanese internment camps, and it has taken 100 years for all of us to learn the story of Tulsa and the destruction of Black Wall Street. While we should be grateful to God for a free and prosperous nation, at the same time we must recognize that there is a lot of room for improvement. Jesus Christ may always be right, but we are not. We need to remember what our founders were well aware of. **We are all sinners.**

To be a citizen of heaven **should** make us uncomfortable as citizens on earth. It doesn't mean we stop working for good in the world. It doesn't mean we can't celebrate the Fourth of July. But it does mean that we stop giving our own nation, or any nation for that matter, a blank check. Regardless of political party the goals of government and the goals of Christ will often contradict one another. And when we have to choose our allegiance, it is essential to remember that we have a higher citizenship. Because if we don't remember the difference and hold fast to this truth we may well end up like the Pentecostal preacher who on January 6th stood on a platform covered with flags and signs saying "Stop the Steal," "Fight for Trump," and "The Right to Keep and Bear

Arms” and declared: “We’re not fighting for a victory, we’re fighting from a victory! We serve a resurrected Jesus! Does anybody think America is worth fighting for? Does anybody think the Second Amendment is worth fighting for? Let the District of Communists know you’re here! Come on patriots!” And the crowd roared. And later that day the crowd attacked the Capitol. **And the resurrected Jesus wept.** Amen.

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 29: 4-11

⁴ This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷ Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” ⁸ Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord. ¹⁰ This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

SECOND LESSON: Philippians: 3:17-21; 4:1

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. ⁴ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!