

Citizens of God's Kingdom

Ephesians 2:12-22

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

I'd like to introduce you to my friend Lili. We met in Denver our first week of seminary, when we had a small-group class together. I was impressed to learn about her background. She had lived in a city with extreme poverty. She noticed how many homeless children were banding together to form parentless families to care for one another. Without any money, these kids lived in city sewers and were easily addicted to drugs and alcohol – which were cheaper than food. With no support from any church or agency, Lili stepped in and began a ministry to these street children. After years of hard work, she was able to open an orphanage that is now self-sustaining.

Lili and I graduated from seminary in 2004, and she is now an ordained pastor, working in the Lutheran church in Colorado. This is a far cry from where she started her street ministry – in her hometown of Bucharest, Romania. Lili shared some exciting news on Facebook last week – she has just passed her citizenship test.

That got me thinking about citizenship in general this week. What does it mean to be a citizen? What is expected or required of citizens? Is that different for natural born citizens and

those who have been naturalized? You can find the answers to lots of citizenship questions on the website for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services – or the USCIS. For example, the only citizenship requirement for those who are born in the U.S. is just that – you have to be born here. Or, be born to parents who are citizens. If you are trying to become a U.S. citizen, however, the list of requirements includes restrictions on age, residency, character, allegiance, language, and knowledge of government and history.

In 2008, the USCIS (formerly known as the INS) created a new form of the citizenship test. It has a total of 100 questions, but each applicant only answers 10 randomly-selected questions. You can see all questions on the USCIS website, or MSNBC has an interactive, multiple-choice version you can use to test yourself. Do you think you could pass? Questions include:

- How many amendments are there to the Constitution?
- Which ones relate to matters of voting?
- Name the 13 original states.
- How many representatives are there in Congress? Name one of your representatives.
- What form is used to become a naturalized citizen?
- If the President and Vice-President can no longer serve, who becomes president?

I'm not sure what percent of natural-born citizens would pass this test, but I'm fairly confident that a significant percentage would fail. Add to this test some of the requirements for good moral character, and no one who fails to pay child support, makes most of their income from gambling, or has spent more than 180 days in jail could be a citizen either. Clearly, some American citizens wouldn't be allowed in if they weren't already here.

But Paul is not talking about American citizenship in our Scripture reading this morning. How was citizenship understood in the ancient world? Paul doesn't talk about it in this reading, but in other letters of his, he talks about his own Roman citizenship. Since Rome was the most

powerful government at the time, holding Roman citizenship granted significant social status and privilege.

How did one get to be a Roman citizen? Largely by birth. All males born either to legally married Roman citizens or to freed slaves were automatically citizens. It was possible to earn citizenship through extraordinary service, military or otherwise, to the state. If you were extremely wealthy, you could've purchased Roman citizenship. At some points in history, when Rome conquered states and provinces, they would occasionally offer citizenship to all the men of that region. Full Roman citizenship was relatively rare in the Roman Empire, and it was highly prized, as it afforded many rights.

In our Scripture reading, however, Paul is talking about inclusion in the nation of Israel, in other words, the Jewish community. And there were two ways to be part of that community. First, you could be born into it. Second, you could join by entering the covenant through circumcision. As far back as Abraham, slaves and servants, neighbors and in-laws could become part of the nation of Israel by being circumcised. Once you had your citizenship in this group, you were an heir to the promises of God, the covenant that was between God and Abraham. And all citizens were expected to live up to certain responsibilities. Not only did males have to be circumcised, but all people were expected to follow the laws of the covenant. These laws included the 10 commandments, the purity laws, and laws for making sacrifices.

It shouldn't be too surprising to us that Paul then gets around to talking about citizenship in God's kingdom. And the questions that should be important to us this morning aren't about American, or Roman, or Jewish citizenship. Instead, we should be asking ourselves about this citizenship in the kingdom of God. How do we become citizens? What are our rights and responsibilities? And how do we balance the dual citizenship we hold?

So how do we gain citizenship in God's kingdom? In the years after Jesus' death, Paul and Peter were the two most popular evangelists – but they had different ideas about how to make new disciples. Peter thought everyone had to first enter the commonwealth of Israel. You had to be Jewish before you could be a Christian. He encouraged interested Gentiles to be circumcised and to follow all the laws written in the Old Testament. Paul, however, thought that Gentiles could enter God's kingdom simply through their faith in Jesus. He preached a circumcision of the heart. And this was a metaphor, not cardiac surgery. Paul insisted that we do need to make a commitment to God, but because of Jesus' saving grace, it doesn't have to be a physical commitment. Instead, it is a spiritual commitment. Furthermore, Paul said, Gentiles aren't bound by the Jewish laws. Jesus, he said, came to give us a different, complementary way to live. So Gentile converts didn't have to bring sacrifices to the temple either.

So if all that's required to get citizenship is faith, what is required of us once we're in? Most governments that confer citizenship, either at birth or through naturalization, have expectations of their citizens. But many of those expectations are unenforceable. For example, Americans are generally expected to vote. Yet in every election, we know that only a fraction of eligible voters show up. No one will have their citizenship revoked for failure to vote.

The same is not true, however, in God's kingdom. God has expectations of us, and God enforces those expectations. It's like we have to keep passing the citizenship test over and over again. God expects not only that we maintain our faith, but that our faith will grow and deepen. God expects us to use our spiritual gifts to enrich the lives of people around us. God expects us to pray, to worship, to learn, to teach, to give, to serve... God expects us to live our lives as followers of Jesus, doing what he would have us do.

What happens when we don't live up to those expectations? Do we lose our citizenship? Well, it depends here on what exactly you mean by citizenship. Do we stop being children of God? No. Nothing can ever interfere with that. But when we don't live up to our responsibilities, I think we miss out on enjoying the rights and privileges that come with being part of God's kingdom. We miss out on the connection that we have with God, the strength we get from the Holy Spirit.

As hard as it is sometimes to maintain our citizenship in God's kingdom, it turns out that each of us here really has dual citizenship. Whether you are American or Korean, Bengali or Brazilian, you have to be a citizen of somewhere. How do we balance being a citizen of God's kingdom and a citizen of our country? I think it's important that we remember that our highest loyalty should be reserved for the Almighty God. And as citizens of God's kingdom, we have to remember that some of our fellow Christians claim their worldly citizenship in a different country.

All this time, since I first met Lili in 2001, she has been a Romanian citizen. But until she posted last week that she passed her citizenship test, I don't think I was really aware that Lili wasn't already an American. Because Lili and I don't know each other as a Romanian and an American. We recognize one another as fellow citizens in God's kingdom. And that's what it means to be united in Christ. That's what Paul means when he says Jesus "came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father." When we focus on our shared citizenship, when we place our highest value on our citizenship in God's kingdom, we are, as Paul writes, "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." Amen and amen.