

Sermon Text for March 8, 2020

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II Chronicles 7:12-18, Acts 22:22-29

“Using your citizenship to your advantage”

I hope you have begun your Lent well as we enter our second week. I hope you have only posted positive and only spoken positive to those around you. What a goal which reflects who our true Savior is, the one who told us to love and pray for our enemies. Now that is different from the world around us and that is something that this Lent we should emulate. I hope that the fears swirling around the coronavirus are not overwhelming you and taking all of your energy and bandwidth. Just be careful where you get your information in regards to the virus and know that situations change very, very rapidly, so stay informed from a source that you know is trustworthy, and no, Facebook does not count. Go onto the CDC website for the most up to date news about it.

“Using your citizenship to your advantage.” What a random title for a sermon especially in the midst of all that we find ourselves facing and in this second week of Lent. I’m assuming that the vast majority of you are people who have been born in the United States, are US citizens, and I hope we realize that where we were born has a tremendous impact upon who we are, but does not necessarily have to dictate whom we will become.

For the vast majority of you if I asked the question what did you do to become a citizen of the United States, you would say absolutely nothing, I was born that way. My parents were Americans, we have lived here all our lives, my ancestors emigrated from Germany or England or Ireland. So it is not that you did anything to deserve to be an American, it is not like you were good at something and so created your own future by your actions in being born American. So really, there is no such thing as a self made person for those of us who are American because we didn’t make ourselves be American, we were born that way.

Have you ever stopped to think what your life might look like if you were born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I would guess it isn’t one of your topics around the lunch table. Have you thought what your life might look like if you were born in North Korea? Your citizenship to this country is not a result of something that you did which allowed you to be a citizen, you were born into it. And yet many of us see our primary citizenship as our nationality. I am here to tell you that your primary allegiance, your primary citizenship must be in heaven. If your primary citizenship is in heaven then it impacts what you do on earth. If your primary allegiance is on earth, then that will impact your eternal status.

Lent is a time to consider our primary citizenship and then once we have claimed it to us it to our advantage to instill the kingdom of God on this earth. Paul understood this. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURE

When we look at our first Scripture today we are reminded that the Israelites live in what we call a theocracy, there was no separation between your political stance and your relationship with God. There was a direct quid pro quo which is laid out in Chronicles that we should identify. God tells Solomon right after one of the most exciting nationalistic times in the history of Israel, right after the temple of the Lord was built, he tells the king Solomon that if things ever go wrong in the country here is what you have to do: humble yourselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from your wicked ways, and then I will bring about forgiveness and healing. I will deliver you from whatever issues you are facing as a people.

Because the people of Israel were the people of God then God was able to draw a direct line between the events of the world and the more or less loyalty and devotion of the people to God. The more they were devout the less problems Israel would have. The more they were disobedient then the more problems the nation would face.

We don't draw those straight lines in our country today do we? We live in a democracy where the people by vote and representation rule the land and we do not pretend that God rules our country. We don't draw a straight line between the tornadoes in Tennessee and 9-11 and the coronavirus and our obedience or disobedience to God. We believe that God is at work all the time even and especially in the most tragic of life situations, and we do not believe that God has withdrawn his favor every time that tragedy strikes. We believe that God is working in the midst of the tragedy, even then, to bring all things to align with his kingdom.

So today we live in a world where there are conflicting, or at least dual citizenships that we all face. A loyalty and a devotion to our God and a loyalty and devotion to our country. They don't need to be contradictory, but at times they can be and they are. Paul was faced with a similar reality when we find ourselves in Acts today. We pick up in chapter 22 where we see that Paul is in trouble again and he is about to be killed by an angry mob. What else would we expect from Paul?

He had been arrested and then asked for a chance to speak to the religious leaders to lay out his case and he does. He begins basically by telling them in chapter 22 at the very beginning, we didn't read this part, that I am your tribe. I am your people. I have the same nationality as you do. I was born a Jew, I was trained by the best in the land. They are following him, we read in vs. 22 until he says in vs.21 that God had sent him to minister to people who were outside of

their tribe, to the gentiles. That was too much. Even if you are in our tribe we don't want you messing with what is fundamental to whom we are as a people.

They say away with him, like the crowd about to crucify Jesus also said away with him, and the Romans soldiers had to come once again to his rescue to save him from being killed by the mob. The Roman soldier was interested in getting the truth out of him so decided that he would torture him. Paul tried to get the truth out to the people in conversation, but the Romans had other means.

It is at this point, in vs. 25 where Paul is tied up and about to be tortured that his faith and loyalty to God is about to get him killed, that he tells the Romans that he is not only a Jew, but a Roman citizen. Keep in mind that his Roman citizenship did not define him, he didn't earn it like the Roman centurion did, where he had to pay for it, no Paul was born a Roman citizen and he brings it up at this point in order to save himself from torture and probable death. So, where does that find us this Lent here at First Presbyterian this second Sunday in Lent? We are not being bound and our lives are not being called for us because of our faith.

I want us to examine your citizenship and what defines you the most? What defines you more your American or your Christian citizenship? It is an important question because if we conflate the two then we will find ourselves having to choose between the two. At times this might happen. I encourage each of you to listen to the speech that Arthur Brooks gave at the National Prayer Breakfast. There he was with the Donald Trump on one side and Nancy Pelosi on the other and he had the audacity to speak about loving your enemies.

He defined moral courage not as being able to speak up against injustices that you feel like the other side is committing, but rather speaking up against your own people, your own tribe who are fanning the flames of hatred, who are not posting positive, who are only seeking to hurt their enemies. In II Chronicles God tells Solomon you are my tribe and when you fall away then you will be punished. Paul tells the religious leaders you are my tribe but you are doing it wrong.

It takes moral courage to speak out against your own tribe when you see that they are not aligning themselves the citizenship which matters the most, which is being a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. I self identify as an evangelical Christian which to many these days means something pretty scary. I self identify as an American and I will put my patriotism up against anyone else's. My ancestors came over on the Mayflower which was before William Penn, so this country is my tribe. We all have our tribe, our citizenship and I encourage you today to use that citizenship to identify ways in which your primary citizenship, as a disciple of Jesus Christ,

is being overlooked. Use your citizenship, your circles of influence, those who know you and trust you and understand that you are on their side and try to interject a little heaven, a little more love into it.

I'm going to throw some Scriptures at you so that you can see how important it is to see ourselves as citizens of heaven. Look at Philippians 3:20 – “Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Look at II Corinthians 5:20: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.” As Ambassadors for Christ in some ways our work is to infiltrate and impress upon those around us the culture and the philosophy of our mother land, heaven, upon those with whom we associate. Ephesians 2:19 – So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but citizens with the saints. That is where our loyalty has to lie. I Peter 2:11 – Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles. We are strangers in this land, in this country for our primary allegiance belongs to God who is a God of love.

This Lent you have been encouraged to post positive, and today I encourage you to lift up the principles of loving your enemies which is central to your citizenship as ambassadors to God in this country that we call the United States. Amen.