

March 4, 2007

Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Sermon: "This World Is Not My Home"

Rev. Bob Jack

Text: "*But our citizenship is in heaven.*"

The apostle makes a straightforward appeal to Christians everywhere, saying, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me."

*Join in imitating me.*

Now, if that appeal had come from most anybody else, you'd probably conclude that that person suffered from gross megalomania. That he's someone in possession of a monumental ego. Someone who's hopelessly stuck on himself. "Join in imitating me."

But what Paul is doing, he's asking us to follow him in every way, not just because he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, but because his ethical life perfectly embodies the very ideals of his Master. And Paul is asking that you and I exhibit the same high ideals in our daily walk with Jesus, too. Wow! That's asking a lot, isn't it?

And yet I think it is something that you and I urgently need to consider, in this time of easy religion, and shallow faith, and cheap

grace. We Protestant Christians, especially, have become so accustomed to thinking of our religion as “salvation by grace alone” that we often forget there is a great stress in the Bible on the ethical dimension of faith. In other words, the importance of living your life according to the teachings of Jesus.

Wow! Wouldn't that be a trip? That people would actually look upon us, you and me, and see something different in the way we live, and wonder (to themselves) if they shouldn't live that way, too!

Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, the city where he would meet his destiny. And he weeps because it is a city gone awry. Like any large city – New York, Los Angeles, Charlotte, even – Jerusalem is full of people who are full of themselves. They only want to live for themselves. And they want all of the things that money can buy for themselves. And Jesus weeps for them. The religious leaders of Jerusalem – even they have forgotten their true allegiance to God, and have begun to live only for themselves.

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me. Live like me. Give your lives to Jesus Christ, and let other people see it in you.

Now that we are once again gearing up for another presidential election, I'm beginning to hear the same tired old rhetoric being used. People are digging around in the closets of their minds, finding their old relics, dusting them off, and putting them out for display.

The other day, for instance, on National Public Radio, I was disappointed to hear a tired and over-worn complaint about a particular political candidate. Someone was concerned that this person was a man of strong Christian faith: "He may let his religious beliefs influence his decisions as President of the United States."

Well, by God, I should certainly hope so. I cannot imagine any sincere believer, whether he or she is Protestant or Roman Catholic or Jewish, not being influenced by the ethical standards of his faith. I would have less faith in him were he not so influenced. I

would question his commitments, his loyalties, and the sincerity of all his actions.

“But you cannot legislate morality,” someone recently told me, as if to suggest that there is “out there” – somewhere – some value-neutral system of laws that the American people can claim without fear that they will be influenced, somehow, by someone else’s moral code.

Well, there is no “value-neutral” system of laws out there at all. In truth, my friends, morality is legislated all the time, and it is only a matter of *whose* morality and *which* system gets the benefit of legislation.

You see, as Christians, you and I may live and dwell in these United States, and abide by its laws, and benefit from its prosperity, but our true and ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ, and (to borrow the apostle Paul’s words) “*our citizenship is in heaven.*”

We are citizens of the United States. And we are citizens of heaven. Dual citizenship.

Now, that sounds a little too “pie-in-the-sky” for some folk. And, we Christians are often accused of being so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly Use. But Paul speaks of our citizenship in heaven as saying something that is full of earthly significance. Really.

I mean, citizenship is about where you live, isn't it? It's all about what values you hold, what commitments and loyalties and allegiances make you what you are. When you cross an international border, and hand the customs agent your passport for inspection, you are publicly revealing where you live, where you make your home, where you will be returning to after your visit is over. That's citizenship.

Paul reminds the Philippians, when he speaks of their particular problems, that they are different, they are Christians. “But our citizenship (your citizenship) is in heaven.” You may give provisional loyalty to an earthly ruler or some political system somewhere, but as a Christian you belong to another ruler, another

kingdom, another place altogether. And that makes all the difference in how you live and in how you behave in this world.

I have a friend named Jim from my college days who spent some time in Bolivia, South America, as a missionary. While he was there, a revolution occurred and the government was overthrown. As he was travelling through a little country town one day with a group of missionaries, shots rang out and bullets started flying all about him. So, he dove for cover and took shelter in an open doorway. Pretty soon bullets were ricocheting off the walls of their building and Jim thought he was going to die. That's when the words came into his head, "Remember, you are an American citizen. You are protected by the government of the United States."

Little comfort that is to me now, Jim thought, as the shots continued flying overhead. But then his whole attitude changed. As he recounted it to me, his words were similar to these, "Suddenly the strangest sensation came over me, and my fright turned into pride. I was proud to be a citizen of the greatest nation on earth. And I asked myself, is this how an American should behave?"

Jim eventually got out of that close scrape with death, but not until he had been interrogated by the *policia* who determined that he was indeed an American citizen and not in any way involved in the violence. Our citizenship determines who we are and how we will react to situations in a foreign land.

Christians have always lived with an uneasy relationship to this life. We have both feet planted firmly on the ground, and we experience every pain and pleasure and predicament that life throws at us. But this world is not our home. Not really.

We are citizens of heaven, and that makes all the difference in how we react to the sufferings and circumstances of this life. You and I won't be miraculously spared the physical hardships of life in the world. We have to go through them because we are human. We suffer and bleed and die just like anyone else. But those physical hardships don't define who we are, either, because we are Christians. It's a matter of balancing our priorities and commitments. This world is not our home.

You know, I can't remember how many times I've been asked the question, "Why is this happening to me?" When someone is suffering loss or going through hardship or enduring pain of some sort, they ask me that question: "Why is this happening to me?"

And behind that question is the implication, "If I'm a Christian, I shouldn't have to go through these things. I shouldn't have to suffer pain or loss or discomfort."

Think gain. Our citizenship may be in heaven, but meanwhile we are tourists moving about in this world, and therefore we are subject to all the limitations that all the other tourists must go through. The difference is, you and I as Christians should be living our lives as examples of what it means to be a citizen of heaven. And part of what that means is to follow Paul's urging, when he tells us to think of other people's needs even before our own.

So, when you are tempted to complain, "Why is this happening to me?" The Bible responds by asking, "Why shouldn't

it happen to you? Who else should it happen to? Why do they deserve it, and not you?”

And that applies to all the good things you experience in life, too. The next time something really good happens to you, ask the question: “Why is this happening to me? Why am I an American, and so privileged? Why have I been so blessed to have a loving spouse and family? A steady income, and a home, and a middle-class lifestyle? Why should I have all these things?”

I’ll bet that if you examined your life more closely, and balanced the good things that happened to you versus the bad, that you would probably admit you have more to be thankful for than regretful. I can’t guarantee that for everybody here, today, but I’ll bet that it’s true, generally.

One further thought about our heavenly citizenship. Traditionally, Christians have thought of our government and our economy as friends in the effort to spread the Gospel. We benefit, unquestionably, from a market economy and a democratic form of government that grants us broad individual freedoms. But

increasingly I'm hearing Christians say that something is wrong, something is amiss in our land. That there's a disjunction between our loyalties to a culture and an economy that is more and more overtaken with rampant consumerism.

Have you ever thought of that? The world wants to treat you as a consumer. That's how the world values you – as a consumer. From cradle to grave – from the day you are born to the day you die, the world has its hand out, saying, “Gimme, gimme, gimme!” No better example could be given than that of Anna Nicole Smith, and the media circus that attends her death and the birth of her daughter. And all of it has to do with greed: Pure, unadulterated, greed, and the matter of who will inherit the fortune she, herself, acquired through questionable means. You and I and everybody else in this world are nothing but consumers, commodities, things to be exploited for financial gain.

But Jesus wants you for a disciple, my friend. Jesus values you for your citizenship in his kingdom, a kingdom that does not bow to the almighty dollar, or to sexual exploitation, or to power.

Or to any of the things that seem to count for so much in this world.

Someone sent me the story of a group of college graduates, all of whom were very successful in their respective careers. One day they decided to look up an old professor of theirs, just to see how he was doing. The conversation soon turned into complaining about the endless stress of their jobs and not enough time to enjoy life.

The professor came into the room with a pot of coffee and an odd assortment cups: porcelain, plastic, glass, crystal – some plain, some ornate, some exquisite. Quietly he told them to help themselves to the fresh coffee.

When each of his former students had a cup of coffee in hand, the old professor cleared his throat and addressed the small gathering:

“You may have noticed that all of the nicer-looking cups were taken first, leaving behind the plain and common cups. While that’s only natural for you to want only the best for yourselves, I

think that's really the source of many of your stress-related problems."

You see, the cup itself adds no quality to the coffee. In fact, the cup merely disguises or dresses up what we drink. What each of you really wanted was coffee, not the cup, but you instinctively went for the best cups. Then you began eyeing each other's cups."

"Consider this: Life is like coffee. Jobs, money, prestige and fame are like so many cups. They're just tools to shape and contain life, and the type of cup you hold does not really define or change the quality of the life you live."

"So, don't concentrate on the cup you're holding, because if you do you won't enjoy the coffee that God has given you. God brews the coffee, but he doesn't supply the cups. The happiest people don't *have* the best of everything; they just *make* the best of everything."

During the season of Lent we look a little deeper into what it means to live as citizens in God's kingdom. Here in church we try to remove the dollar sign from being the central symbol of our

existence. And instead, we substitute the symbol of the cross. That cross over the pulpit behind me reminds us that we are citizens of another world.

The cross is a terrible reminder of the horrible death Jesus endured for our salvation. It's also a disturbing reminder of the uneasy relationship we have with the world, that seems to recognize only wealth and fame and power. Our citizenship is in heaven.

Friends, it can be a very empowering thing to know where your true homeland lies. If you know you have been redeemed, and that you're assured of eternal life, you're free to live for God in this life, no matter what may come of it, good or bad. When life has thrown its worst at you, and you feel like you lost your way, it's good to reach for your passport – and to know your citizenship is in heaven.