

Life and Faith from the Edge

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Texts: Philippians 3: 20-21

For our citizenship is in the heavens, from which we also eagerly await a savior, Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, who will transfigure our lowly bodies, conforming them to the body of his glory by the operation of his power, setting all things in order under himself.

Three years ago, several members of the church together read a book by Bill McKibben, entitled, “The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened.” In spite of the fact that I love everything Bill McKibben writes, and this book is right in the sweet spot of the kind of thing I like to read, I somehow missed this one. I just discovered it this week as I was digging through our church website to find out what it means that we are a Just Peace church.

Former Pastor Dan Smith used McKibben’s book in a sermon three years ago, partly because the book hits so close to home – about eight miles from home, in fact, because it is McKibben’s reflection on “what the hell happened” in America, as he puts it, through the lens of his childhood home of Lexington.

Naturally, as is all of McKibben’s work, the book is rhetorically creative, politically insightful, and, in a subtle way, theologically profound. Although he doesn’t present it this way, part of McKibben’s book is, for me, an extended reflection on the key image from the passage I read earlier. As Paul says it: “For our citizenship is in the heavens.”

There are three things to notice right away about this metaphor of our citizenship being in the heavens. First, the pronoun is “our.” Paul is talking about followers of Christ, as a collective body, as the church. Most Christians these days would be more likely to say “my” citizenship is in the heavens, as if salvation were an individual affair – but according to Paul, this is about us, who we are together as a people, and the corporate nature of our identity.

Secondly, “citizenship” is a perfectly good translation of the Greek here, but it is worth noting that the original word is “politeuma” - which sounds a lot like “politics” to me. It sounds a little different if we read this as “For our political identity is in the heavens.” It focuses the image, rightly I believe, more on the nature of our deepest commitments and priorities, rather than just who issues our passports.

Thirdly, “in the heavens,” can sometimes be taken in an escapist vein. “It doesn’t matter what happens here on earth, because our citizenship is in the heavens.” That’s an utter misreading of the metaphor, because the nature of our responsibilities in the here and now is exactly what Paul is talking about in this passage. Our heavenly citizenship is why we are who we are in this world. Having our citizenship in the heavens is why our commitments and priorities come from God, not from the faint echoes of identity that come from where we live in this world.

And here's the tie to McKibben's book. He says that the churches he's interested in these days, the ones being "useful" to the real issues of the world and the real concerns of people's hearts, are the ones who live at the edge of the establishment. He traces the changing nature of the church's relationship to American society, and he says what we all need to hear today: it is not only okay, it is good, that the church is on the edge of society these days.

He writes: "This sense of being a little apart from the world comes, I think, as a relief. Back in the days I've described, when these mainline Protestant churches contained fifty-two of one hundred Americans, they had to be all things to all people. The power that came with that—what we'd now call "privilege"—was attractive, but it was such limited power. If you're the culture, then you can't be the counterculture."

And being the counterculture is simply another way to say, "our citizenship is in the heavens."

McKibben talks about what the church has been for most of its history, since the fourth century basically, when Constantine united empire and church. "When an institution gets very big," he says, "its radical edge is very far from its center. And for Christianity that radical edge is actually the heart—or should be."

Having a different citizenship, a different politics, a different set of commitments and priorities, puts the church at the edge of the establishment, and that is exactly where we need to be.

I hope this message isn't new to you. Really, how could it be? For at least 50 years First Church has been on the edge in many ways. We were one of the first Open and Affirming congregations. The Covenant Testimony the church adopted in 1990 says that we will engage in nonviolent resistance to evil. We are committed to the vital work of reparations and dismantling White Supremacy in our systems and our hearts. All of that doesn't come from the pages of some contemporary statement of liberal values. It comes straight from the heart and teaching of Jesus. Dan preached about being on the edge three years ago, and I am sure others did before and after that.

But what I want to focus on now is how this feels at this moment.

Over the past few months we have seen innumerable examples of cruelty, violence, fearmongering, and all the other standard tools of the administration's political show. As hard as it is, I want us to think about how that has been making us feel, and where that feeling comes from. Angry? Embarrassed? Powerless? Disgusted? Depressed? Enraged?

When people we care about, people we learned from Jesus to care about, are being harmed, those emotions are all understandable, right and good. If you're not angry, you're not paying attention, as the saying goes.

But it is also worth paying attention to the fact that those emotions can come from two different places. They can come from our citizenship in this country, and from our citizenship in the

heavens. They can come from our sense that we are at the center of the establishment, or they can come from the edge. If they come from the center, then I might humbly ask if they are bound to eat you alive? All anger all the time is not helpful. All depressed all the time is not good.

But if all that comes from the edge, then it can be mixed with ever so slight a sense of detachment, of hope, even of joy from beyond. If our citizenship is in the heavens, then we have to have an awareness that along with being powerful and dangerous, the establishment is pathetic and transitory. The fact that there is ultimately no power there is manifestly clear in that they keep having to parade around how much power they have. If our citizenship is in the heavens, then hope and joy and peace become our most powerful weapons in fighting this garbage.

If we have accepted, I mean emotionally accepted, that our citizenship is in the heavens then our anger, embarrassment, powerlessness, and disgust come from the vision we have the beauty of the world that God is actually calling us to, calling us to live in now.

Indeed, what we have to offer the world, especially in these terrible days, is not just anger, but the vision of love that our anger comes from. Not just disgust, but the taste of hope that our disgust comes from. Not just embarrassment, but the true peace that our embarrassment comes from.

I know it takes a long time to get used to a new home, a new citizenship. But I hope you will all deeply and, in your hearts, and guts, not reluctantly, or merely by necessity, but openly and joyfully treasure this new location of our citizenship – on the edge, in the heavens.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.