The Gift of Citizenship
Philippians 3:17-4:1

A few years ago I took my family to visit New York. We stayed overnight in the Navy Lodge on Staten Island and took a ferry into the city the next morning. Along the way, we passed the Statue of Liberty holding her lamp aloft as a beacon of welcome to all those coming from foreign shores seeking refuge in our blessed land.

As you may know, Lady Liberty was erected on her star-shaped pedestal in 1886. Three years prior, a young New York poet named Emma Lazarus wrote a sonnet called *The New Colossus* and donated it for auction to raise funds to pay for the pedestal. A portion of that sonnet is engraved on a plaque affixed to the statue’s base. Doubtless you have heard that portion of the sonnet, but the entire poem is worth the hearing. Contrasting the Statue of Liberty with the Colossus, a giant statue of ancient Greece, Lazarus wrote the following:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Globes world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Indeed, the Statue of Liberty is the Mother of Exiles from whose beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome! For just beyond her and a little further up the bay, you’ll find Ellis Island where many of those exiles first arrived upon our teeming shores. Ellis Island was opened as an immigration depot just a few years after Lady Liberty first lifted her lamp beside the golden door. Between 1892 and 1954, when the island was finally closed for immigration, nearly 17 million people passed through the island’s portals on their way to citizenship in the United States. By some estimates as many as 4-in-10 Americans trace their ancestry to someone who sailed by Lady Liberty on their way to Ellis Island.¹

Why did they come? What were they seeking? Most came to escape harsh conditions in their homelands – poverty, war, famine, and oppression. Most came looking for the
opposites – prosperity, opportunity, happiness, and freedom. By and large nearly all were willing to renounce their original citizenship to become citizens of our nation, so great were and are the blessings of America. And still they come – hundreds of thousands each and every year – searching for a better life – hoping, if possible, to become citizens of this great land.

In today’s text, the apostle Paul talks about two kinds of citizenship – earthly and heavenly citizenship – and describes the character and consequence of each. Notice Philippians 3:17-20. Paul says, “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.” Then describing those who are citizens of this earth only, he goes on to say, “For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them and now tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.” Then, in contradiction to these, he turns his attention to those who are in the world but not of the world – those who are citizens of heaven and says, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (NRSV)

Yes, the world is peopled by two types of citizens: those who are citizens of this earth only, and those who are citizens of heaven. Which kind of citizen are you?

Those who are citizens of this earth only are called enemies of the cross of Christ. (Phil. 3:18) What does that mean? Perhaps they rejected the Christ of the Cross. In other words, they didn’t believe Jesus really was the Savior. They looked for another to save them and give them the hope of a blessed eternity. And the world is full of folks like that today. The world is full of folks who reject the Christ of the Cross. They look for another or put faith in another to save them.

Yes, they may have rejected the Christ of the cross or they may have rejected the cross of the Christ. Perhaps they denied the sufficiency of Jesus’ death to secure salvation and were adding other things to the cross of Jesus Christ. In Paul’s time there were Judaizers who said we are saved by the cross plus circumcision and obedience to Jewish dietary and other ceremonial laws. And then there were Gnostics who said we are saved by the cross plus some secret knowledge – a mix of philosophy, astrology, mythology, and mysticism. And in every age there are those who are adding to the cross of Christ, saying Christ’s death was not enough to pay the price for our sin and that something more must be added to secure our salvation.

Yes, they may have rejected the Christ of the cross; they may have rejected the cross of the Christ; or they may have rejected the way of the cross that Jesus imposes on his disciples. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Lk. 9:23 ESV) Christian discipleship requires self-denial. We must turn our backs on ourselves and our faces to the Savior!
But enemies of the cross don’t deny themselves for the sake of Christ; they indulge themselves for the sake of pleasure. In the 19th verse Paul describes these enemies of the cross and says, “…their god is their belly.” (ESV) In other words, they live for their earthly appetites. Now we humans have many appetites: appetites for food; appetites for drink; appetites for sex; appetites for pleasure, appetites for fun and for excitement; on and on the list may go. And our appetites are not wrong in and of themselves. But they become wrong when we cease to be the masters of them and they become the masters of us. When that happens, we tend to do shameful things and live only for earthly pleasures. So Paul says, “…their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” (Phil. 3:19 ESV)

And we see this everywhere in society today. People glory in their shame. They boast, and brag, and glory in things that were once too shameful even to utter or to mention. They post them on social media, parade them on TV, and print them in magazines. Their minds are truly set on earthly things and little else besides. They live as if this world is the only world there is, and this life is the only life to live. They have no interest in eternal life nor in the world to come. And so they grab all the gusto they can even when grabbing gusto means defying their God!

Yes, the world is full of folks like this. And we shouldn’t look down our pious noses at such people. Rather, we should pity them and pray for them. We should have the same attitude as Paul who said, “…many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.” (Phil. 3:18 NRSV) Why should we pity them and pray for them? Because “Their end is destruction.” (Phil. 3:19 NRSV)

You see, just as countless millions have come to this country to escape death and destruction in their own home countries, Paul says the enemies of the cross, will face eternal destruction unless they become citizens of heaven! In contrast to these, Paul writes of himself and his comrades and says, “…our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 3:20 NRSV) If we are citizens of heaven then “He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.” (Phil 3:21 NRSV) In other words, he will give us a body suited to live with him forever!

So how do we transfer our citizenship from earth to heaven? We can only apply! We cannot demand citizenship in heaven; we can only ask God to give it. And he’ll give it to all who ask him for it. Writing to the Colossian Christians, Paul said, “God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:13 NRSV)

My friend, have you asked to make you a citizen of heaven? Have you said, “Dear God, for Jesus’ sake, forgive my sins, redeem my soul, rescue me from the power of darkness, transfer me into the kingdom of your Son, and make me a citizen of heaven?”
Paul had, and others like him had, and they had all become citizens of heaven. And as citizens of heaven, they lived lives reflecting their heavenly citizenship. So Paul admonished the Philippians to follow his example, an example of good citizenship. “Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us,” he said. (Phil. 3:17 NRSV)

Yes, Paul wanted the Philippians to follow his example. And he wants us to do the same. In the verses immediately preceding this passage, Paul holds forth the example he wants us to follow. Listen as Paul describes his life as a citizen of heaven. These verses come from the beginning of Philippians chapter three. Paul says, “…we…worship in the Spirit of God (or an alternate translation – we worship God in spirit) and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh…I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ…I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection…if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil. 3:3, 8, 10-11 NRSV)

What a contrast to the enemies of the cross. Instead of making a god of his belly, he worshipped God and made Jesus his Lord. Instead of glorying in shameful things, or even in his noble heritage, he boasted only of Jesus Christ and everything Jesus had done for him! And instead of minding earthly things, he set his mind on heavenly things – the hope he had of sharing in a resurrection like the resurrection of Jesus Christ! That is the example we should follow!

My friend, are you a citizen of heaven? Have you asked God to make you a citizen of that place? Have you said, “Dear God, for Jesus’ sake, forgive my sins, redeem my soul, rescue me from the power of darkness, transfer me into the kingdom of your Son, and make me a citizen of heaven?” And are you following the example of Paul who lived the kind of life that every citizen of heaven should? Are you worshipping God and serving Jesus as your Lord or is your god your belly and are your appetites your master? And then again, are you boasting about Jesus and all he has done for you or are you bragging about shameful things or all of the thing that you’ve done for yourself? Finally, have you set your mind on heavenly things or is it set on earthly things? Where is your focus? Where do your affections lie?

In New York harbor, Lady Liberty lifts her lamp aloft beside the golden door. It is a light of welcome, greeting all those fleeing from destruction and seeing refuge and citizenship in this place. On a hill far away, the Lord of Liberty hung on an old rugged cross to free us from destruction and to afford us citizenship and refuge in his place. Do you have that citizenship and does your life reflect it?

Well it’s no secret that we are in the midst of a heated Presidential primary season. Candidates from both parties are striving to win every possible vote to secure their nomination. A few days ago, a member of this congregation was having dinner with her
small children when one of them said, “Mommy, did you know there’s going to be a new President soon?” “Why yes, I do know that,” she said. “A lot of people think it’s going to be Donald…Duck!” he said! Well I doubt it’ll be Donald Duck! And it’s entirely too soon to know whether or not it will be that other Donald. But as American citizens, it is our high privilege and solemn obligation to vote for the one we believe best qualified to lead us. And how we vote reveals a great deal about us. At the very least, it reveals which party, or which person, holds our allegiance.

Spiritually speaking, we are also called to cast a vote. Will we vote for Jesus or for ourselves; for our appetites or for our God; for this earth only or for heaven too? How we vote will reveal a great deal about us. At the very least, it will reveal where our allegiance lies. At the very least it will reveal whether we are enemies of the cross or citizens of heaven. My friend, the ballot box is open. How will you vote? You decide! Amen.

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http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/april-17-family-history-day