

“I Pledge Allegiance” (Philippians 3:20)

Lent 2, February 28, 2010

When I was in middle school, my idea of good citizenship was saying the “Pledge of Allegiance” every morning in homeroom. My teachers, however, had a different perspective. To them, citizenship had to do with behavior. In fact, they graded us on it. Back then, report cards had three grades for each subject. The first showed how well you mastered the material – the standard A, B, C, D or F. The second, “work habits,” showed how well you mastered your assignments. For that, you could get an E for excellent, S for satisfactory, or U for unsatisfactory. And the same was true for “citizenship,” which graded you on how well you mastered yourself. Attitude, cooperation, respect – these things fell under “citizenship.” And as you might guess, this was the grade my parents cared about most. “A’s” were desired, but they expected “E’s” in “citizenship.”

Now, I don’t know: Do schools still use the term “citizenship” or give grades for it? I hope so, for I really like the idea of good “citizenship” being equated with good behavior – or even more, with good character, a good lifestyle. After all, it’s easy to pledge allegiance with words. True allegiance, true loyalty, true citizenship has to go beyond words. How do you live your life? What do you actually contribute? These are the things that matter – and this is true whether we are talking about good citizenship at school, good citizenship in our community, or even...good citizenship of a spiritual variety.

Yes, there is such a thing! St. Paul mentions it in our text. He says, “**Our citizenship is in heaven...**” As a matter of fact, that is what I would like to talk about today. But before I do, let me give a little background.

Paul wrote these words to the Philippians – “**Our citizenship is in heaven**” – and that is significant, because the Philippians were kind of a special case. They lived in Macedonia but were not citizens of Macedonia. They were Roman citizens – and proud of it! You see, Philippi had been founded by retired Roman soldiers. Instead of a pension, they were given this land. So their values were Roman, their laws were Roman, their citizenship was Roman. And this brought certain privileges but also responsibilities – like living in a way that brought credit to Rome. The last thing Philippians wanted to do was to set a bad example. That would let their country down. Bad behavior, bad attitude, bad lifestyle – that was beneath a Roman citizen. Even if something was okay with the surrounding culture, that didn’t make it okay for them. Lowering their standards was unthinkable! Fitting in would be shameful. They were called to something better. After all, their citizenship was in Rome!

So you see why Paul’s words would resonate with these Philippian Christians. “**Our citizenship is in heaven.**” They were called to an even higher standard of living – above Macedonian, even above Roman. They were called to live by the teachings of Jesus. After all, hadn’t Jesus suffered and died for their salvation? Hadn’t Jesus redeemed them from sin for new and eternal lives? Hadn’t Jesus

made them citizens of heaven? So how could they let Him down? They wanted to bring credit to Jesus! They wanted to show their allegiance to Jesus – show it in ways that truly mattered. Not just with words. Not just with rituals. With godly behavior, godly attitudes, godly lifestyles. This was how they would show their fellow Philippians: **“our citizenship is in heaven.”**

Now this was not easy for them. Living as a minority in a city that prided itself on its values and pressured Christians to go along – no, that was not easy at all! But what was the alternative? To fit in with those who **“live as enemies of the cross of Christ”**? To go along with those whose **“god is the belly”**? To affirm those whose **“glory is in their shame”**? To imitate those whose **“minds are set on earthly things”**? No way! That would let Jesus down. They were called to something better, and these words of St. Paul helped them keep this in mind: *For your neighbors, self-indulgent behavior might seem good enough, “but our citizenship is in heaven!” For your friends, materialistic attitudes might seem good enough, “but our citizenship is in heaven!” For your families, pagan lifestyles might seem good enough – even virtuous – “but our citizenship is in heaven!” And we must show our true allegiance Not just with words or with rituals. We must use godly behavior, godly attitudes, godly lifestyles to pledge our allegiance!*

That was the challenge then. That has been the challenge for Christians ever since then: to remember our true allegiance and live accordingly. Sure, we all know the church’s spotty track record. Sometimes we have done well, maintaining a clear witness to society. Sometimes we have failed miserably, swallowing society’s values hook, line, and sinker. But the challenge has always been the same. To remember who we are and Whose we are. To remember **“our citizenship is in heaven!”** To remember and to live accordingly no matter what the cost.

And what is the cost? Here in America, there might not seem to be any. This might seem a challenge mainly for persecuted Christians. And certainly, the challenge for them is clear. *But...* Well, let me share a story with you.

As a teenager, I thought a lot about persecuted Christians, especially fellow Lutherans living in communist countries. We discussed this often in Youth Group – quite theoretically – not knowing I had relatives in East Germany who were among the persecuted. Ten years ago, I got to know them, and as you might guess, I asked them how they managed to hold firm against the pressure. They admitted it had been hard. After all, if you went to church, you were watched by the secret police. In school, you were singled out for ridicule. Christian kids couldn’t play team sports or join the equivalent of Scouts. And if you were confirmed, you could forget about college or a career. Why, the communists even came up with a substitute for Confirmation – *Jugendweihe* – and pressured kids to do that instead, claiming it was basically the same thing – except that it was atheist, of course. But whenever the kids asked, “Why can’t we join in?” –

the parents' answer was the same, "We're Christians." They didn't put down others. They just lifted up Christ – as if to say: *We have a higher allegiance – to Jesus Christ – and we don't just pay Him lip service. We practice our faith. We follow the Bible. Jesus comes first. Yes, we may live in a communist country, "but our citizenship is in heaven!"*

Now, though, here is something interesting! After hearing how things were, I figured that after reunification it must be easier being a Christian. That brought smiles – and you know the kind I mean; the kind that says: *If only that were true! "In some ways it's easier," I was told. "But you know, freedom has its temptations, too. These days, people are so greedy, so self-absorbed, and morals have really gone down hill! Plus, in the old days there was a clear dividing line: this was Christian and this was not. You had to choose which side you were on. It cost you, but at least your allegiance was clear. These days, it's gotten so hazy. More people may call themselves Christians, but they live just like everyone else. And they don't see why that's a problem. They just see it as your problem. In that sense, it's not easier being a Christian today. It may even be a little harder."*

Interesting! And...oddly familiar. For the situation here is not so different, is it? Here, too, many people call themselves Christian. But what does that really mean? Here, too, many people pay lip service to Christian values. But what difference does that really make? If the average American in the average community were to visit an average church and hear even an average sermon on any one of the Ten Commandments, chances are they would leave very upset. And I'm not just talking about sex, by the way. Even a sermon against coveting or malicious gossip, or one on keeping Sunday a day for rest and worship – that would do! And morality aside, if this average American were to hear an average sermon on John 14:6 – where Jesus says, "**I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me**" – there's an even better chance that they would be very upset...and think: *How narrow-minded! How judgmental! How politically incorrect!* Why, they might even consider such a sermon un-Christian!

Ironic? Sure, but that's how things are these days. What passes for "Christian" has gotten so hazy! Many people define "Christian" according to whatever *they* feel is right – which, frankly, can be a moving target. So pity the person who thinks the Bible should define what is Christian! And pity the person who actually tries to live according to the Bible! There is definitely a cost to discipleship! Definitely a cost, even here.

And you know this even better than I do! I mean, people expect pastors to be a little weird in the religion department. They cut us some slack. With church members, not so much. Often, they just don't "get" you. *Why won't you go along with this, that, or the other? Why can't your kids do this, that, or the other? Why must you always...*the list of pressures can go on and on. And you want to be

gracious. You don't put down anyone. But you do want to be faithful. So the challenge today really is the same as the Philippians faced, the same every generation of Christians has faced, whether overtly persecuted or not. And we know what our response must be. Whatever the cost, we'll lift up Christ. Our highest allegiance is to Jesus Christ, and we won't just pay Him lip service. We'll practice our faith. We'll follow the Bible. For us, Jesus comes first, because **"our citizenship is in heaven!"**

In fact, that is the encouragement we take home with us today. Christians *are* different, because **"our citizenship is in heaven."** So let's dare to be different! Period! Let's practice heavenly **"citizenship"** with no apologies! Let's practice heavenly **"citizenship"** in ways that will ultimately matter! Let's use godly behavior, godly attitudes, godly lifestyles to pledge our allegiance to our Lord!

As for the cost, think back to what I said earlier about "citizenship" in school. The part I didn't mention is that to get an E for excellent, you had to be on your best behavior. That didn't necessarily endear you to the kids who thought it was cool to mess around. Sometimes it was hard to be the outsider. Sometimes it was tempting to go along with the crowd. Good "citizenship" could really cost you! Or so it seemed. But from our perspective now, doesn't that seem foolish?! I mean, where are those cool kids now? What difference does their opinion make now? Absolutely none. On the other hand, character makes a difference now. Attitude makes a difference now. Respect makes a difference now. Excellence makes a difference now. All those "good citizenship" qualities make a difference *now*.

And that's the point, isn't it? Fitting in is vastly overrated. Short-term, it might seem easier, but long-term, faithfulness matters most. In the light of eternity, it won't matter at all whether we were cool or popular or successful by worldly standards. Where we're going, worldly standards won't mean a thing. Loyalty to the Lord will. Living by the Bible will. Showing our allegiance will – showing it not just in words but in lifestyle. That is what we want to keep in mind. For this world is not our home. We're just here temporarily. We're only passing through. When we finally *get* home, it will be forever, and just think what our perspective will be! Looking back on this world, we will laugh at its tawdry temptations! Face to face with our Lord, we will see His surpassing worth! Standing in the light of eternity, we will be so glad that we thought long-term, not short-term; so glad that we put Jesus first; so glad that we kept in mind: **"our citizenship is in heaven."** Amen.