

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
May 26, 2019

## **Heavenly Citizens**

Ephesians 2:11-22

"The last full measure of devotion." That's how Abraham Lincoln described the ultimate sacrifice as he dedicated the cemetery at Gettysburg in 1863. And that's what Memorial Day is all about, faithfully remembering those who have laid down their lives to defend our country. Though there's not complete agreement on the exact location and circumstances in which Memorial Day originated, this day to honor our nation's war dead is widely observed, especially by decorating graves. In this way, we're not only brought face to face with acts of courage and sacrifice, but also forced to confront the horrific realities of human conflict and division.

In today's text from Ephesians, Paul reminds us of how God has overcome the division and self-destruction of humanity. Paul himself was no stranger to ethnic, national, and racial divisions. In his own geographic and social context, ethnic judgments made by Jews against non-Jews were prominent. This didn't mean that Jews were more susceptible to such prejudices than other ethnic groups. All groups of people were sinfully prone to attitudes of pride and exclusion. But in Paul's missionary setting, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles was foremost.

This distinction was reinforced by the Mosaic law, with its rules and regulations governing the life of God's people. According to Paul, the Mosaic law, in and of itself, was a good gift of God, designed to help his people live distinctively in a way that reflected his holiness and brought blessing to other nations. But the Mosaic law had come under the influence of fallen spiritual powers that corrupted God's creation, turning the law into a source of pride and privilege, rather than the instrument of blessing that it was meant to be. As a result, Israel had failed in its mission to be a light to the nations and a blessing to the world.

But the failure of God's people didn't mean the failure of God's purposes. God's goal was still the redemption and restoration of humankind. And this is what he has accomplished through Jesus Christ. In Christ's death and resurrection, God has acted to unite humanity and to create a radically new humanity. In our text, Paul declares that Christ himself "is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations" (vv. 14-15a). In other words, Jews in Christ and Gentiles in Christ have been made one people, as a sign of God's will for the healing of humankind. In fact, says Paul, Christ's "purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two" (v. 15b). That is, those who've been reconciled to God, both Jewish and Gentile believers, constitute a new humanity. God has "put to death their hostility" (v. 16).

Yet we still live in a world where hostility seems to reign, a world where we wait for the full unveiling of what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ for the restoration of humankind. True, Jesus Christ, raised from the dead by the power of God, is Lord, and has begun the work of reclaiming the world for God's purposes. But this means that God's work of making all things new is still unfolding, and that the church has been called and created by God to be an embodiment and sign of God's reconciling project in the world. So God is taking all

those who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and forming us into a multinational people that exhibits God's victory over Satan and the powers of evil.

There are many contexts where we live out our identity as the multinational people of God in Christ. One of them is here in our own nation, for which so many people have fought and died. During this weekend, and particularly tomorrow, we remember how we live in the midst of benefits that we haven't earned, but for which others have given their lives. We're citizens of a nation whose freedoms have been protected and preserved through enormous sacrifices.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair tells a story about a friend's parents, who were Jewish immigrants from Europe. They came to America in search of safety. Blair says:

[They] lived and worked in New York. They were not well off. His father died when he was young. His mother lived on, and in time my friend succeeded and became wealthy. He often used to offer his mother the chance to travel outside America. She never did. When eventually she died, they went back to recover the safety box where she kept her jewelry. They found there another box. There was no key. So they had to drill it open. They wondered what precious jewel must be in it. They lifted the lid. There was wrapping and more wrapping and finally an envelope. Intrigued, they opened it. In the envelope were her U.S. citizenship papers. Nothing more. That was the jewel, more precious to her than any other possession. That was what she treasured most.<sup>1</sup>

Here was a woman who loved her country and prized her citizenship. She realized that she belonged to a country whose fundamental values and vision stood out in the world, providing hope to the poor, the persecuted, and the oppressed. That's still true in our own day and time. It's one of the reasons why we shouldn't take American citizenship for granted. Nor should we lose sight of those who have served and sacrificed to defend the rights and responsibilities that come with being a citizen of the United States. That includes some of you here this morning.

But as Christians, we always view American citizenship through the lens of kingdom citizenship. We believe that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has triumphed over the evil powers that oppress creation and humankind. God has installed Jesus Christ as Lord of all creation. In the chapter right before today's text, Paul says "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, . ." (1:22).

So by faith in Christ, we experience the reality of his rule over our lives. This means that more than anything else, we're citizens of the reign of Christ. There's nothing wrong with loving your country. But as followers of Jesus, our first love is for the kingdom of God, over and above any love of nation. Sometimes love for Christ and his reign may mean supporting and celebrating American convictions and actions. Other times it may mean criticizing or opposing the country's policies and practices. That doesn't mean you're being unpatriotic. Patriotism can take many forms, including resistance to the prevailing mood or the popular positions of the day.

Patriotism is basically rooted in love of country. It involves gratitude for our country's values, freedoms, and form of government. Patriotism leads us to seek the country's good, and to work for its flourishing, even at great cost to ourselves. That may include defending the nation, extending its influence, and promoting its interests abroad. In short, patriotism can be a good and important thing in our lives.

But patriotism is different from nationalism. Nationalism takes patriotism and expands it in dangerous and destructive directions. Nationalism involves devotion to country at the expense of other nations. It pits nation against nation, rather than promoting cooperation

among nations. As one person has put it, "Nationalism means putting country above humanity."<sup>2</sup>

The expression "American exceptionalism" is used a lot in public circles. In the positive sense, it can be a way of talking about the uniqueness and influence of our country's history, its ideals, and its form of government. It also has to do with the way that we use our uniqueness as a positive force for peace and justice in the world. But "American exceptionalism" can also have a negative sense. It can get distorted and misused to promote the idea that we're superior to other nations and people groups, as if American identity is inherently more valuable than other national identities.

But the gospel that we proclaim cuts against this way of seeing the world. If Jesus came to die for people of all nations, to reconcile us to God and restore humankind to God's will and purpose, and if God raised Jesus from the dead and installed him as Lord of all creation, then the notion that any nation is God's favorite, or that any ethnic or racial group has an inside track with the Lord, is contrary to the Christian message and mission. That would be thinking and acting like Christ's death was for nothing, and that there's no hope for divided humanity. But Paul announces something very different. He declares, "But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (v. 13). God's will and purpose are that people of all nations come to a knowledge of him.

When you believe that and experience its truth by confessing Jesus as your Lord, then you become part of a multinational, multiethnic, multiracial community that Paul calls "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (v. 19). In the process, you don't lose your American citizenship, but you do take on a greater citizenship, a higher allegiance, a more surpassing love than love of country, namely, love for and devotion to the Lord and his church. I like the way that Mother Theresa put it when she said, "By blood and origin, I am all Albanian. My citizenship is Indian. I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the whole world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

If you belong to Jesus and to his reign, it will be reflected in the way you live. Your patriotism to the kingdom will show up in your lifestyle, and will be embodied in our life together as the church. John Hess-Yoder once served as a missionary in Laos. During that experience he discovered a helpful illustration about the kingdom of God. He says:

Before the colonialists imposed national boundaries, the kings of Laos and Vietnam reached an agreement on taxation in the border areas. Those who ate short-grain rice, built their houses on stilts, and decorated them with Indian-style serpents were considered Laotians. On the other hand, those who ate long-grain rice, built their houses on the ground, and decorated them with Chinese-style dragons were considered Vietnamese.

The exact location of a person's home was not what determined his or her nationality. Instead, each person belonged to the kingdom whose cultural values he or she exhibited.<sup>4</sup>

This weekend, as we reflect on love of country, and the sacrifices that flow from it, let's recall our primary citizenship in the reign of Christ, and the values it demands. Let's seek not just the good of America, but the good of the world. Let's work and witness not just for the interests of the nation but for the interests of all humankind.

<sup>1</sup> Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life* (New York: Knopf, 2010) xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Eubanks, "A True Patriot—and Christian—Opposes Nationalism." July 25, 2018. Accessed May 23, 2019 <<http://larryeubanks.com/nationalism-patriotism/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Mother Teresa, quoted by Ruth A. Tucker in *Guardians of the Great Commission*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, No. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 125.