

A New Home

by

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Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In a moment I will say a word and when I say the word, I want you to picture a face.¹ To recall a person and a form, someone who comes to mind as soon as I say the word. Are you ready? The word is citizen. Citizen. Do you see a face? I see a face. The face of a young volunteer I encountered when I went to cast my vote two weeks ago. She was standing attentive at the end of the check-in table, a sticker affixed to her green cardigan, “election volunteer.” She pointed me to my cubicle; made sure a pen was available, and returned to her post. Citizen.

Do you see a face? I see a face. The face of one of our presidents, staring attentively ahead for his official photo. His expression is appropriately shaped for the moment – a mixture of warmth, happiness, and gravity. Behind him, our nation’s flag is positioned properly; red, white, and blue draped just so. Citizen.

I see a face. The face of a middle-aged woman, hungry yet hopeful for help. She stands in line alongside her neighbors, dressed in clothes that bare the wear they all feel in their bones. Below her eyes sit dark rings, evidence of sleepless nights spent in defense of her city. Beneath her right temple, a large bruise. Her left hand has several cuts. She stares ahead with defiance, seeking aid now that her city is no longer in her country’s control. Citizen.

I invite you to see one more face. The face of an educated, well-read man. A man who has traveled widely. At one time he was respected, a member of the inner circle of society’s elite. A who’s who. But now he’s devoted – some would say he’s *fanatic* – to a rival movement. In his life, he’s known the thrill of power, and the terror of conversion. Now, his body bears the marks of his recent change of allegiance. He’s a person with a word for us today. A word about the word, citizen. His name is Paul.

¹ This opening format was inspired by Fred Craddock’s sermon, “Praying Through Clenched Teeth,” in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2011), 241.

Like many of us, Paul takes citizenship seriously. It's part of who he is. Paul is a citizen of Rome, the most powerful empire on the planet. For quite a while Paul fully embraced his Roman citizenship. But then something happened to Paul, an experience so severe he knew right away that life would never be the same. On a dusty road to Damascus he personally encountered the risen Christ. The experience literally blinded him. From that moment forward his life was irrevocably different. His allegiance shifted. Even though Paul remained a Roman citizen, he talked about it only when necessary. Only when it benefited him. Now, Paul can't stop preaching about a new kingdom; a kingdom ruled by the risen Christ.

Now I think it safe to say that most of us believe our nation's leaders matter. That the apparent quality of our leader makes us what to support them more or less. Surely, the fervent intensity of our recent election cycle proves this correct. I think Paul believes this to be true as well. Which is why he writes verse after verse describing his new ruler, Christ the King. Paul uses vast vocabulary:

- Christ is the Image of the invisible God
- He is the firstborn of all creation
- before all things
- head of the body, the church
- through Christ God reconciled himself to all things.

Summed up, Paul's message is this: Christ reigns alone over a kingdom with cosmic origins and specific implications. Let me show you what I mean by expanding on Paul's verses:

- Christ is the Image of the invisible God (cosmic), but lived among us in flesh and blood (specific).
- Christ is the firstborn of all creation (cosmic), yet entered the world as a vulnerable baby (specific).
- Christ is before all things, but is here with us at this time and in this place.

- Christ is the head of the body, the church, and chose to participate in its traditions and rituals.
- Through Christ, God reconciled himself to all things, rescuing you and me from the power of darkness, transferring us into the kingdom of Christ.

Christ is cosmic and Christ is here.

This is the core of the message the church proclaims! The substance of why we gather here in this sanctuary as a community. Christ is cosmic *and* Christ is here.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It's a hinge week between the liturgical seasons of Ordinary Time and Advent, a single Sunday when we pause to reflect on the meaning of Christ's kingship. With Advent's advent next Sunday we'll begin a new lectionary year. Today we close out the year that has been, by focusing squarely on Jesus Christ as the sovereign of history and the sovereign ruler of our hearts. Christ is the one to whom alone you and I as people of Christ owe our ultimate allegiance.

As I have been carrying this text and this theme around throughout the week, the words of the Catholic mystic and poet, Francis Thompson have rung in my mind:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!²

Christ our king is a paradox. To follow faithfully we must embrace this ambiguity. Yes, we reside here on the Main Line, citizens of the United States, committed to our community and country. Yet our

² Francis Thompson, "Kingdom of God," accessed online: <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/kingdom-god>

allegiance lies ultimately in the cosmic kingdom of Christ. This is not our defining citizenship. We have a new home.

So what are we called to do with this paradox? I believe two things:

First, to follow Christ our King, we must accept our status as beloved and redeemed people, here and now.

Paul says that God reconciled all things through Christ, by making peace through the blood of his cross. A mentor of mine says it another way, “Christ is dying to love us.” We need only accept our beloved-ness and come home.

In his novel *Godric*, Frederick Buechner tells the story of the eponymous main character, a 12th century monk. For much of the novel, Godric obsesses on his vices, even as healings and miracles happen in his presence. Years ago he left home on a journey, which has been rife with struggle. Along the way he met Reginald, who reveres him. To Reginald, Godric is a saint because of the goodness that has also stemmed from his life. At one point in the story the two contrary men are reflecting on Godric’s life. Godric is cataloging his misdeeds, proclaiming his unbreachable distance from God. In the silence, Reginald speaks up to help guide Godric’s next steps. He says, “repentance is a turning back, a going home.”³

Repentance is going home. Maybe like Godric, you believe your misdeeds keep you from going home. That if the list was read, if the details were displayed, the decision would be definitive denial. But Reginald was right. When we voice our faults, when we confess the things that keep us from God, we take steps on the journey home. That is why we confess our sins together at the outset of worship every week. As long as our sins sit in us they grow and weigh us down, forming a barrier to freedom. When voiced to God, they are forgiven. The barrier

³ Frederick Buechner, *Godric: A Novel* (HarperOne: New York; 1999), 50.

drops away, and we are swept up into the arms of the risen Christ, who welcomes us home.

The good news is we already have citizenship in Christ's kingdom. All we need to do is come home and take up residence. Nothing else. No tests. No entry exam. No background check. All of us are citizens through Christ. All of us.

So, first, Let us accept our status as beloved and redeemed people, here and now.

And Second, to follow Christ our King we must live like its true. That our citizenship primarily resides in the kingdom of Christ.

This is a ceaseless challenge. For we all know it is often expedient to tether trust to temporal entities. To cling to what can be seen here, to succumb to scarcity and hunker down in fear.

But, Christ our King offers us a new way to live. I invite you to again see a face:

The face of a neighbor walking up the front steps of the house across the street. Groceries are in his hand, and more remain in the car. The door opens and he walks inside, unloading the items into the pantry and refrigerator. Back and forth he goes until the shelves are full. A gift of sustenance and care. Citizen in Christ's kingdom.

Or this face. The face of a volunteer, sitting behind a table in Congregational Hall this morning. She invites those who walk by to learn more about a ministry. On the table in front of her are flyers, pictures, brochures, evidence of good work by good people. She extends the invitation this Christmas to give a present of compassion and support. Citizen in Christ's kingdom.

Or this face, actually faces. The faces of about twenty people, gathered closely at the foot of their friend's bed. The faces begin to sing songs that remind their friend of home. "Lift High the Cross," "For all the Saints," and of course, "Amazing Grace." Their friend sits and listens, blankets drawn up close and snug. She can no longer reply as she once did, but her eyes shine with misty gratitude. A moment of sacred connection and benediction. Citizens in Christ's kingdom.

Can you see them? The faces of citizens committed to a cosmic kingdom who live it out here and now. Who live like it's true.

One of my favorite books is Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. It is the story of John Ames, a Congregationalist minister who is nearing the end of his life. John decides to write down his memories and learnings for the benefit of his son. He recounts struggles and joys, heartbreaks and moments of elation. At the end of the book, which is the end of John's life, John begins to sum up all he has shared. He reminds his son, "there is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense at all because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal."⁴

My friends, every act of love is an incarnation of Christ. Christ is cosmic and Christ is here. Why? How? Because of love.

Every time we love like Christ we manifest the kingdom of God here and now. Through our beliefs and actions we declare our citizenship in Christ's kingdom anew. We come home. Imagine what this world could look like if Christ was our King. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead: A Novel* (Picador: New York, 2004), 238.