*Our Citizenship In Heaven*

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Fred Craddock, professor of preaching, tells this tory about his baptism, which he took very seriously, Just shy of 14 years of his life he remember pondering these words that he was told to prepare for his full immersion baptism: “When you’re raised from the dead, you’re different. When you’re raised from the dead, you don’t look the same, you don’t act the same, and you don’t sound the same.” If the ones who taught him were using words, if they wer writer, they coul’ve just written, “He is risen from the dead/ he has triumphed over death/ he lives forever/ he is seated at the right hand of God.” Words have power to change lives. But what if you only have paint and brush, how are you going to paint change? How do you paint a resurrection “glow”? The minister used words from scripture after Fred came up out of the water, “Now you have been raised with Christ. Set your minds on things that are above.” As he walked home with his wet clothes, Fred tried to think what not looking or talking the same meant. He went to school Monday morning thinking, *Is anybody going to know that I’ve been raised? Should I dress up a little better from what I’ve been dressing? It wouldn’t hurt. Do I talk another way? Do I throw in a verse of scripture now and then?: What do I do at ball practice? Are they going to say, “Well, looks like he’s been raised from the dead.” How do you talk? How do you walk? How do you relate?*

Those are age old questions that arise when people talk about becoming Christian, about accepting Jesus. When I was young I came to believe that being Christian meant being completely different, a new person. And I was puzzled about that. I think I formed this image of one who followed Christ as “glowing”, perfect, joyous all the time, loving to everybody, and pious. It didn’t take long to figure out that after my initial joy I did not glow, was not perfect, felt sad often, and still got angry at people In fact it seemed that the more I found out about Christ, the more I prayed, the harder it got to be “perfect” or happy. I found myself struggling to figure out what I should be like.

Outside the Philippian church there may have been those who were engaging in self-indulgent behavior, and exhorting the Philippians to do so as well. After all, Paul had taught that Christians were no longer under the Law. These Christians had not thought it necessary to think like Christ because they were excused from following the Law and thus developed the attitude “anything goes.” They understood that they were headed for resurrection when they died. So it didn’t really matter what they did in this life. They were guaranteed a spot. But Paul wanted the Philippian church to see things differently. He exhorted them to have the mind of Christ, to be like Christ. How were they to do that? What would that look, sound and act like? It would look, sound and act like Paul himself. They were exhorted to imitate Paul himself. Why? Because *he* was an imitator of Christ. He knew that the reward for being like Christ was a sharing in the heavenly kingdom and thus a sharing in the victory and glory of Christ. But, Paul does not stick with the image of the Christian being translated into a future existence in heaven. He pictures a heaven brought to earth, rather than our going into heaven in some far off distant future. Paul is telling his hearers that heaven is not just a future event and place, it is here and now. He is speaking of the transformation of humanity. Paul is saying that Christians are destined to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, here and in their time in this earthly existence.

The goal of the Christian is “knowing Christ”, sharing his mind. Christ himself is the blueprint for Christian behavior. Paul has become the model of this for the Philippian church. In turn other models emerge in Paul’s absence and imitating Christ is passed on from generation to generation. Christians who embody the gospel serve to demonstrate the same love of God to the world that Christ demonstrated. Theresa of Avila puts it this way: “Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.” So the question we can ask ourselves is, “Do others look at us and think ‘In that person I can see something of what It means to be like Christ?”

Ruth Hoover was a church secretary. She was not physically the most attractive person in the world. She always seemed to have energy and was constantly busy. In her business, however, she embraced people with her words and her deeds. In her presence we felt like we were welcomed and respected, no matter how you, how old, how hyper, how sedate. She seemed to like everyone and displayed genuine concern to all. There was not a moment I didn’t like being in her presence. She gave me little things to read, prompted me to attend church camp, asked me to sit by her in church when I was alone. I loved her hugs and above all I embraced her smile. In her presence my faith grew. Ruth died while I was still young. But I still remember her smile and her warm embrace. It was that smile and that remembrance of her that drew me back to my faith after years of abandon it. For me she was the imitator of Christ that glowed for years as if embers from a banked fire, then flamed into renewed hope when all hope was gone.

Being imitators of Christ is our task. We have people of great faith around us to look to, but most of all we have the mind of Christ in us. We read about what Christ did, how he reacted to people, and what he said.; he fed the hungry, received the sinner into his presence, talked about God a lot, healed and nurtured the sick, forgave even Peter who denied him three times, forgave those who hung him on a cross, spent time alone with God, had tremendous amount of patience with his disciples, and drew others to God by telling common event stories. Jesus always had God’s interest in mind rather than his own.

To acknowledge our citizen ship in heave, those are the things we ourselves are called to do! What is being raised all about? It’s about imitating Christ as best we can. It’s about giving up our self-indulgences and giving the love of God to others through that imitation. It’s following the Spirit of Christ in us in the best ways we know how, always learning those ways as our faith unfolds. It isn’t that we glow, or are joyous all the time, or even run on an even keel in a constant state of peace. In fact sometimes we weep and lament like Jesus over Jerusalem. We see that the world is still not living in God’s will, that millions do not yet know Christ, that our friends do not know the value of believing, that people are searching hard for something and missing the very thing that will answer their emptiness, that injustices abound, that violence, aggression, hatred are very much a part of our daily living. But our joy, our peace and assurance comes in knowing we are in the presence of the living Christ in how we respond to others.

It isn’t that we can look at someone and just by their looks say, “Oh, there is a Christian.” It’s that we can look at a person reaching out to someone in need and say, “Oh, there is Christ at work in this world!” It isn’t that we do the Christian thing necessarily, it’s that we do the Christ thing.