



“The Nature of Citizenship”

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

This is an auspicious Sunday to take the pulpit. No matter who you voted for - or plan to vote for - we Americans are all on edge these days. The division and polarization of our country, our community - in some cases even our neighborhoods - is unprecedented. Barely a generation ago, a president of either political party nominated justices to the federal judiciary, as well as to the Supreme Court, and confirmation was a matter of course - a Supreme Court justice, whether nominated by a Republican or a Democrat, was easily and unremarkably confirmed with the vote of 90 or 95 or even 100 senators. Those days long gone with plenty of blame to go around and now a thoroughly politicized judiciary, the only consideration being who wields power and whoever doesn't plotting for what they'll do when they wield it again.

Younger Americans never did have faith in institutions the way most of us older folks do. And yet for society to function, a certain amount of trust in certain institutions is necessary. So perhaps some of you are like me when I say that it feels as if I stand now not on solid ground but on shifting sand. I never before wondered if I could trust elections, if I could trust the government, if I could trust law enforcement, if I could trust the basic good will of my fellow citizens. But now I do.

Today I worry not so much about the outcome of Tuesday's election as about everything else - will the count be fair? Will people accept the results? Will we see protests turn to riots and looting and violence? Will those who are threatening vigilante justice actually take to the streets with their military armaments? Will we see long court battles that make the contested presidential election of 2000 look like child's play? How will we be manipulated by misinformation and disinformation via social media, even from foreign actors?

Maybe your worries are like mine. Or maybe your worries are different.

The point is we live in troubled times and few of us are feeling the rock-solid trust in our American institutions that we once did. Maybe citizenship has changed and maybe it hasn't. But something certainly feels different.

In recent days I have found myself envying the Christian faith of those who never did fully trust institutions the way I did. Over the past weeks, I sat with several small groups of black Christians in our community. "Everyone is talking about the pandemic," one person said. "But the pandemic of COVID is nothing compared to the pandemic of racism." Another person wondered why it has taken white Americans so long to see the outrage in police killings. Some of us woke up in a particular way at the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. "Why didn't you believe us before," he asked. "We've been telling you this is happening for so long. Remember Rodney King?"

What really struck me in these conversations, though, was the depth of Christian faith these neighbors in our community rely on. As black Americans, trusting that their vote will count and that the election will fairly represent them has NEVER been a sure thing. Trusting the good will of neighbors and an even playing field has NEVER been a sure thing. Their sure thing is Jesus. Their sure thing is the wellspring of the scriptures and faith in God.

So unlike me, confused and a little disillusioned about my now shaky faith in American institutions, black American Christians are 100% crystal clear about where their faith lies. And I'm embarrassed to say I felt envious.

So when I read that the Beatitudes are about "the nature of citizenship," in the words of Rev Tim Beach-Verhey of Faison, North Carolina, it really caught my attention.

This All Saints' Day I want to dig deep into what it means to be citizens of the kingdom of God *in this life, in this life*, and I want to lean into my citizenship as a child of God and how that must, *must* shape the nature of my citizenship in this country.

Each of Jesus' sayings begins with the word "blessed" - some translate the Greek as fortunate or happy. Not happy as opposed to sad but happy as opposed to empty or dissatisfied. Another take might be one of the Hebrew words for blessed - *ashar*, which literally means to find the right road. Let's try that. Instead of happy or blessed are the poor in spirit - the humble - how about you are on the right road when you are poor in spirit (humble) - you are on the right road when you mourn - when the pain of the world touches you deeply - you are on the right world when you are meek and lacking in the worldly power - you are on the right road when you deeply hunger and long for righteousness - for what is right. You are on the right road when you are merciful, when you are guided more by mercy than by judgment let alone vengeance. You are on the right road when your heart is pure, when you seek to make peace. You are on the right road. And then, even, you are on the right road when you are persecuted for doing what is right, standing for what is right. You are on the right road. You are fortunate. You are blessed.

Why? The grammatical genius of this passage is the combination of present and future tense ... you are blessed, you are on the right road because of what will be - you will be part of the kingdom of heaven, you will be comforted, you will inherit the earth, your thirst for what is right will be satisfied, you show mercy and you will receive mercy, you will see God. You will see God. You will be called children of God.

This is where our trust must lie. To use the language of this day, happy are you, blessed are you, you are on the right road, when you live into your life and calling as a saint - as a disciple - as a follower of Jesus - because you will be one with all the saints who now live eternally with God, you will be part of God's kingdom which we glimpse only in part in this life but we will one day fully know.

This is the nature of citizenship in the family of God, citizenship in the communion of saints - to lean into humility, mourning, meekness, deep hunger and thirst for what is right, to choose mercy, purity of heart, and the way of making peace. Not because it's easy. Not even because it's rewarded. But because it is what God is like, it is the way Jesus came to show us. And in the end it is the only true and life-giving way there is.

And as we lean into this way, as we renew our commitment to this citizenship, as we double down on humility and mercy, on mourning with all who mourn, especially those who have died at the hands of great injustice, as we never ever give up on the quest for righteousness, for peace; We unite ourselves with all those who choose this same path here in this congregation, and in physical and virtual Christian communities all over the world AND with all those faithful citizens of God's realm who have gone before.

This week we marked the second anniversary of the terrorist attack on Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, killing 11 people at sabbath prayer and injuring 6 more. The rabbi of that congregation has a particular relationship with the pastor of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina - Mother Emmanuel Church, as it is lovingly known, where a terrorist killed nine people in a Bible Study, including the senior pastor. That was in June of 2015.

These American citizens - citizens of the kingdom of God - killed while practicing their faith as children of God - are among those I see in the communion of saints today. We remember countless believers who lived their lives in faith, seeking however imperfectly to live into these beatitudes, to be close to God, to live the way of Jesus - making peace, seeking righteousness, showing mercy and humility. Some of them we know by name - either because they're famous - Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King Jr - or because they personally touched our lives - members of this church and members of our families - our neighbors and our friends.

This is the day we underline that sentence of the creed that says "I believe in the communion of saints," this is the day that we share the sacrament of communion imagining these pews filled to overflowing and overshadowed by a cloud of millions more who share our faith and cheer us on even and especially when our way feels lonely, even when we are tempted to put our trust in some institution not worthy of our trust, even when we long for a way more comfortable and rewarding. Because they're there.

We are not alone.

Whether the election turns out the way we want or not. Whether the worst comes to pass after the election in violence or disinformation or any number of other terrible things we haven't even thought of.

No matter what. Our citizenship is sure. The power of the faith we share - power in meekness and mercy and always seeking what is right - is rock solid.

The road may not be easy. But it is the right road. We are called blessed. Amen.