

Citizenship

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

Philippians 3:17-4:1



17 Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. 18 For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their

glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!"

I'd like to begin my sermon today by thanking Joan Austin for her powerfully worded message on the sign this week. No, not the one about changing our clocks (although some people feel pretty strongly about that, especially if they have young children) but the sign that is out there today. You may have missed it. It reads: BRIARCLIFF CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH: WE CONDEMN THE ATTACK ON THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF NEW ZEALAND.

Those are powerful words. They express a position that I endorse. Probably most of you endorse. Perhaps not everyone in our community endorses...because despite the work we do here at BCC, white supremacy

is on the rise in our country and around the world. Multiple studies bear that truth. We may have emancipated the slaves. We may have marched on Washington and changed a few laws, but in the hearts of some people, we are living in a time when “white makes right!” and any glimmer that we are sharing the world with folks who are different from us is perceived as a threat. It sets up an us vs them scenario that has to be settled here and now lest we lose...something. Maybe it’s jobs. Maybe it’s a slot at college. Maybe it’s a space in the parking lot...or on a bus. There is an entrenching of belief that pits us in mortal combat against one another...and it is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ as anything I can think of.

In a long and interesting opinion piece in the NYT this past week, Thomas Edsall writes about No Hate Left Behind and the perils of entrenchment that are happening around the world. The full article is here:

<http://tinyurl.com/citizen19>

In his article, he cites several psychologists and sociologists to describe the politics of hate that we see manifesting in our country on a daily basis and toward the end of his piece he quotes John Tooby (an anthropologist and psychologist from University of California):

Tooby pointed to group pressure to adopt down the line agreement on issues when there is, in fact, much room for dissent and disagreement: There is no necessary reason why someone’s position on abortion should predict their position on global warming should predict their position on welfare should predict their position on school choice should predict their position on illegal immigration. These are all entirely logically independent, yet there is a natural tendency for alliance gravitation to pull people into

sets — often binary sets — because issues are more often flags of identity, and it creates in-group dissension to have a multiplicity of views inside the group.

Even more important, he writes,

Honest reasoning about issues is inconsistent with group loyalty. To be a good group member, I should adhere to a position because it is the group's position, while believing that the facts justify it.

I think this concept is relevant in our era of Democrat vs. Republican, Black vs. White, Male vs. Female, Straight vs LGBTIQ+, Christian vs. Non-Christian...or in this week's case, Muslim, in particular. We faction off in these binary opposition groups that make no rational sense and certainly no "faith sense."

In Christchurch, New Zealand , a group of Muslims were meeting for prayer on a Friday morning, much like a group of Christians might meet for prayer on a Friday morning. They had greeters at the door, probably a little music playing inside, a sense of fellowship with whoever arrived. They called out, "welcome!" "good to see you!" "hello brother!" to anyone who approached the time of praising God, of learning about God, of worshiping God.

So far, it sounds pretty familiar. It could be us gathering next Monday for our study of Jesus' vs the State as part of our exploration of Lent.

It could be a study of Torah at CSI.

There is no need to see it as a competition or a threat to our faith. There is no need to worry for their souls. There is no need to see those who are gathering in love of God as our enemy.

And on most Friday's, that "hello brother!" was greeted with the same. But on this past Friday, that *at the door greeting* was met with murder. With bullets. With hatred. With a camera strapped to the terrorists body so that he could look back and revel in his superiority, his victory, his carnage in the name of god (and you can't see it but I use a small g here, because I'm not sure what god he is worshipping but it bears no resemblance to the One we are about this morning).

50 people dead. Another 40 injured. A community terrified. Mission accomplished. Even if he's arrested (and he is) he may find comfort in Paul's ability to convey a message while under house arrest. Hopefully, he will read Paul a bit more deeply and discover that Paul would not condone his behavior.

Saul might have condoned it (he had played the role of coat-check boy while the Christian evangelist Stephen was being stoned to death) but *Paul* had seen the light! He was now modeling himself after Jesus and in doing so, he was beginning to understand that the issues that *could* divide us in this life are not worthy of our citizenship in the next life. Paul understood that these factions we nurture are unhealthy, and he points us to living toward the love and acceptance that Jesus represents.

For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, (perhaps tears of shame for his past actions or tears of compassion for the

actions of his present followers) *many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven.*

When we find ourselves caught up in us vs. them, stomach vs. glory dichotomy; when we see complex ideas broken into simple, either/or bumper sticker slogans, we need to check ourselves against the faith that Jesus taught when he dined with tax collectors, chatted with prostitutes and healed on the Sabbath. We need to see a bigger truth of God's love before us and nurture that love by saying, "ok, that's different. I wonder what it means?" We need to work toward being less threatened by one another and more accepting of the differences that build community and allow us to function in healthy ways as people of faith...as people whose real citizenship will be in a place that we have no control over.

John Toobey's partner, Leda Cosmides, sums this concept up eloquently: *Since the Enlightenment, people have been trying to build bridges between disciplines, and when they do, new insights are achieved and humanity benefits. Should the healing arts have been kept separate from biology? If they had, we would not have antibiotics and modern medicine. Should psychology be kept separate from biology? If it is, we will never understand how the mind works. As a result, we will never understand how to make war less likely, how to cure autism, how to help people understand risk, or how to prevent racism, to name just a few problems on which evolutionary*

psychologists are making progress. Indeed, if we keep psychology separate from biology, people will continue to believe that “race” is a sensible concept; in contrast, human population biology tells us that humanity is not divided into distinct “races.”

This week, on Wednesday evening at 7pm, there will be a prayer vigil at FCC with the Upper Westchester Muslim Community. It will be an opportunity to say, “hello brother. Hello sister.” to one another and work toward building some bridges and being good citizens of heaven on earth. It will be a chance to imitate Paul, who changed his ways for the sake of Jesus Christ. It will allow *us* to be models for our community and beyond. I hope you will join me, in Jesus spirit. Amen.