

Date: March 7, 2004

SUNDAY: Lent 2

SERMON: Heaven's Commonwealth

Text(s): Philippians 3:17 - 4:1; Luke 13:31-35

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Our years of ministry in international settings, combined with Carol's experience teaching English-as-a-Second Language to new immigrant children, plus having served two parishes where the membership included a fair number of refugees and immigrants have given us first-hand knowledge and a lot of sympathy for the problems that immigrants and other resident aliens have. While crossing cultural and national boundaries and learning to live in a foreign land can be and is exciting, it is also very difficult.

Sometimes those difficulties are not the ones you'd expect— dealing with the bureaucracy, struggling with the language, finding a job. In one of the schools in New Jersey where Carol was teaching ESL, a conversation in the faculty lunch room one day shed some light on a different sort of problem that new immigrants confront. One of the teachers was lamenting the fact that new school policies had made it harder to do some creative things that they used to do with the children. For instance, one teacher said that some parents of her children used to come to the school kitchen and cook a turkey every Thanksgiving and all the children would be dressed as pilgrims and Indians, and get to help prepare a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. But now school regulations about food were too strict to permit that.

Carol agreed that it was a shame they couldn't do that any more, because her children, these new would-be Americans and their parents really didn't know anything about our celebration of Thanksgiving, and though most of them would like to participate in this very traditional American holiday, they didn't know how to cook a turkey or the other foods that go into our traditional American Thanksgiving feast. At

that, one of the other teachers, in all seriousness and with great indignation, exclaimed, "What! they don't cook turkey? Well, if all these new immigrants don't celebrate our holidays the way they're supposed to be celebrated, they should all go back where they came from!"

Carol and I were still chuckling the next morning at breakfast as we imagined a scene in the immigration line at Kennedy Airport. The Immigration Service officer asks each new arrival, "Will you roast a turkey on Thanksgiving?" And if the answer is negative, the officer says, "Right. That's it for you. You're outta here."

Being the outsider is rarely a comfortable position to be in. Those who uproot themselves and move to a new place, are always, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the circumstances, outsiders. Implanting ourselves in a new community, whether it be the radical changes involved in moving to a new country in the case of immigrants or even the lesser change of moving to a new city or a new neighborhood or a new college or university, changes our position from insiders to outsiders. And as outsiders, we feel that we're very different from the insiders—the people who already belong there, either by birth or by long assimilation. The insiders have their own customs, their own patterns of behavior, their own language even, and are always, to some extent, wary of outsiders who bring something new and different into their midst.

Perhaps you saw the January issue of *Downeast* magazine where the feature article was devoted to the question of who is a Mainer and who is "from away." Do you have to be born in Maine to be a Mainer, or can one acquire the status of Mainer? The article cited examples of people, like E. B. White, Winslow Homer, Elizabeth Noyce and others who weren't born in Maine but became accepted as Mainers by the commitment they demonstrated to the state. The article concludes, "You don't have to be a Mainer to benefit from living in Maine. But maybe you become a Mainer when the state benefits from you." The article certainly provoked a lot of

discussion; the letters to the editor in the next issue amply demonstrated one truth about folks who call Maine home— they are independent thinkers.

This theme of being the outsider or the resident alien is prominent in both of our lessons this morning. In our Gospel lesson, we see Jesus, the epitome of the outsider or resident alien in his own land, as he faces the threat of King Herod's murderous suspicion. He is uttering a lament over Jerusalem which is his destination. *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who always stones the prophets and kills those who are sent to you! How often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you would not.”* The citizens of Jerusalem are the insiders. They're secure. They're well-housed and well-fed. They live in the city which is the hub of political and economic power, and they participate in the power that is generated there. What need have they of prophets from Galilee or the provinces? Prophets are troublesome people at the best of times. They always take the part of the outsider. They rail against the establishment. They dare to suggest that not everyone has to eat turkey at Thanksgiving to be a good citizen; that perhaps the turkey should be given away to those who are hungry or that the hungry should be invited to join the family at the dinner table. At best, the prophets are a source of discomfort who challenge the conventional wisdom; at their worst, they are troublesome meddlers who are best done away with quickly. Yet Jesus' lament makes it clear that by rejecting the outsider who makes us uncomfortable or who raises disquieting questions, we may miss an incredibly enriching interchange of new ideas or new vision. We may miss the very presence of God in our midst, gathering us in like a mother hen gathers her chicks.

Being the outsiders, the resident aliens, if you will, is central to the Christian's identity. The reason for this, as St. Paul reminds us, is

that Christians are already citizens— insiders, if we can continue that terminology— of a different world. *“Our commonwealth (or citizenship) is in heaven,”* Paul says, *“and from there we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Our baptisms are the sign of our citizenship in the commonwealth of heaven— our passports, as it were. Heaven is our true motherland— the home country of our hearts. In the world around us, we live as resident aliens. We're outsiders here, not insiders. As an old gospel hymn puts it, *“This world is not my home, I'm just a 'passin' through.”* We have a similar statement on our bulletin cover many Sundays, don't we— *“a pilgrim people still?”* I hope we don't just pay lip service to that notion. It's a fundamental truth about us. We do not allow the mere fact of our residence in this land to determine our deepest sense of identity. Those things are determined by the citizenship we hold. As Christians, we are not first and foremost Americans or Mainers or white or black or male or female or gay or straight or any other category by which citizens of the world identify themselves and form walls around themselves to keep others outside. Nor do we pursue the same goals that natives of this world pursue. We don't regard money or power or the number of academic journal articles we've had published as the ultimate realities of life. We don't give our ultimate allegiance to our company or our denomination or our country or to any other earthly institution. We are, above all else, citizens of the commonwealth of heaven. We live by heaven's laws. We operate by heaven's values. We practice heaven's ethics. We pray, *“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,”* and then try to be the good citizens through whom God may answer that prayer.

This is why Christian faith is never a purely individual or private matter, but always puts us squarely in the midst of a community. That's what a commonwealth is— a community of persons who hold certain things in common. The church is the commonwealth of heaven, and the

laws of that commonwealth are the laws that govern our relationships.

Andrew Lincoln in his book Paradise Now & Paradise Not Yet, says,

“It is not, as has often been thought, that heaven is the homeland of Christians to which they as perpetual foreigners on earth must strive to return, but rather that since their Lord is in heaven, their life on earth is to be governed by the heavenly commonwealth.”

And yet, it’s so easy for Christians to forget that— to become so comfortable in our surroundings, so assimilated to the customs and culture of the world, that we forget where our true commonwealth is. Kathleen Turner, in the current issue of *Weavings*, a journal of spirituality which we get here at the church—many of you are familiar with it— tells of going to a church where her friend’s daughter was being baptized, supposedly into the commonwealth of heaven, but as she learned as the service went on, in reality into a very much more earthly and nationalistic commonwealth. She was shocked when the congregation sang a jingoistic, patriotic hymn, and then felt physically ill when the pastor prayed a militantly nationalistic prayer and concluded it with “O Lord, we pray for peace in our world. We really do. But not at the expense of our way of life.” Later, she said, as she reflected on that experience, she recognized that the pastor was at least being honest in acknowledging that for him and that congregation, the American way of life was the commonwealth to which they had pledged their highest allegiance.

We should not expect that if Jesus’ message made him an alien or an exile in his own nation among his own people that our following of Jesus will endear us to our own nation and people. To be a follower of Jesus carries with it the burden of being the outsider. We may live in this world, adapting to its customs, fitting in as best we can, but in a very real sense, we will

always be outsiders— resident aliens— and we shouldn’t be surprised to find ourselves sometimes out of step with the world around us. If we are really trying to live out the values system of our homeland, a value system characterized by those cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love, those values are bound to clash at points with the values of the place where we reside as resident aliens. And that will inevitably be perceived by the power structures of the world as subversive or threatening. But we cannot help ourselves; once we have heard the angels singing, we can never get the melodies of heaven out of our minds and hearts.

During the 1940’s a young woman entered Oxford University. At the time, she had little focus in her life. During her years at Magdalen College, she came under the influence of C. S. Lewis, who was a professor of Medieval literature. Her conversations with Lewis, who was a very conscientious citizen of heaven’s commonwealth, eventually led her to reclaim her own citizenship in that commonwealth. Against the advice of her family and friends, she left Oxford and entered nurses’ training. She worked on the cancer ward of a London hospital, and gradually came to realize that most of the hospital staff neglected the patients who were terminally ill. They died very much alone. She felt that these dying patients ought to have their family and friends around them in their final days, and moved with compassion, she tried to get others to listen. But her pleas fell on deaf ears. With determination, she decided that the only way to be able to have the influence to change things was to become a doctor herself, and at the age of 33 she entered medical school. After graduation at 39, Cicely Saunders went on to found the hospice movement, first in England, and later in America, an institution that we take for granted nowadays. When all around her were furthering their own interests, and urging her to fit in with the rules of their society, she recognized that she was an outsider, a resident alien, and so she was able to

love other outsiders, those dying patients who were overlooked or ignored by those who were too busy or too indifferent. She lived out of hope rather than self-interest. She took her cues from the one she confessed as the true sovereign of her homeland. And she made an enormous difference in the land of her sojourn.

When we begin, by the lives we live, to show that the roots of our hearts are planted in the soil of heaven, we too will be able to make an enormous difference. We will be able to show love to the outsider, to the stranger, to the castoffs because we recognize that we ourselves are strangers in a foreign land. We will be able to work for justice, to be peacemakers and witnesses to heaven's truth in a world deceived by the lies of hell. Here in the church, in heaven's colony in the midst of a broken world, we will sing the songs of hope and faith and find the courage to live faithfully as we wait for the full revelation of the kingdom of God.