“Heavenly Citizens” A sermon based on Psalm 27, Luke 13:31-35, and Philippians 3:17-4:1 delivered on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 16, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young.

(Our Theme throughout Lent will be the Lord’s Prayer. Today we explore the words: “Who art in heaven . . .”)

 When we hear the title of this message, I am sure we picture angels--the multitude of the Heavenly Host-- Cherubim and Seraphim and all those ethereal beings that we heard about in various scriptural readings, both in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. They are the citizens of heaven. We, on the other hand, are citizens of the earth.

 There couldn’t be a more down to earth individual than the Apostle Paul who, when he was Saul, savagely persecuted the early Christian believers, was struck down to the ground and blinded by the brightest light from heaven and heard the voice of none other than Jesus himself admonishing him for the persecutions he had been performing. Paul’s conversion story, told three times by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (Chapters 9, 22, and 26), grounded him in the truth and gave him the deep conviction that he had to be about the business of founding churches and then to tend to them by having the authority to speak words of truth to those congregations through his many letters.

 Therefore, Paul’s words to the church in Philippi are most instructive as we seek in this Lenten season to unpack the rich meaning of the Lord’s Prayer—the only prayer given directly to us by Jesus. In addition, the words of Paul to the Philippians are even more significant when one realizes that Paul is writing from prison where he has been held under the charge of a capital offense! The Philippians and Paul have had a long and happy relationship. His letter, then, is partly to assure them of the saving grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as to remind himself of that fact. He is in prison. If his mind would stay on “earthly things” (v. 19c) as do those of whom he calls “the enemies of the cross” (v. 18a) then he would indeed be anxious, miserable, and afraid. Instead, he can speak of joy!

 In essence, what Paul is telling his beloved church in Philippi is to not get caught up in imitating those whose only concern is the “god in their stomach”—their human appetites—but to imitate him and his closest companions, Timothy and Epaphroditus in their understanding that they are “citizenship is in heaven.” “Our Father, who art in heaven” is the deity we need to be paying attention to, not any “father” or ruler here on earth.

Our Luke passage described exactly what Jesus thought of the earthly powers that be, when he tells the Pharisees to respond to “that fox” Herod, that he would not be deterred by threats, but would be hanging around to finish God’s work of healing as long as need be, and not on Herod’s schedule. In addition, as I pointed out last week, Jesus sees himself as a loving parental, almost maternal figure, who seeks to gather the children of Jerusalem together “like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.” (v. 34)

In seeking wisdom from our lectionary readings for today, in relation to being heavenly citizens, not earthly ones, we need look no further than Psalm 27. This triumphant song of confidence, this Psalm of David, is very specific about the dichotomy between heavenly and earthly parents. In verse 10 we hear this: “*Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.”*  The inference is clear. It is our “Father in Heaven” that will be there as our safety net, not earthly ones.

 Psalm 27 also describes for us the one thing we should seek as citizens of heaven. In verse 4, the psalmist states, *“One thing I asked of the Lord; this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.”* The psalmist also describes this house of our Lord, this dwelling place of our heavenly Father, in verses 4-5:

 *For in the day of trouble
    he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
    and set me high upon a rock.*

*Then my head will be exalted
    above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
    I will sing and make music to the Lord.*

Perhaps there is no better description of heaven than this!

 The Apostle Paul reminds the Philippians and, of course, us, to “stand firm in the Lord in this way.” (4:1) Perhaps we have only heard the “stand firm” part. It is now time for us to ask the question, “in what way, Paul?” The answer is right there, too, in verse 20. We are to live as “citizens of heaven.” We must, as Mark E. Hopper states in his commentary on Philippians, “examine our own cross-denying ways.” (FOTW, p. 63) And the way to do this, is by imitation. Mr. Hopper emphasizes that this imitation is real, it is “never some kind of slavish reduplication of a pattern, it is rather and incarnation of a living example.” We are not to be “mimes” of a Christ-following life, but flesh and blood embodiments of that way of life. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, late Jesuit theologian, was majorly influence by the Apostle Paul’s letters. He has famously stated: “*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”* As Paul says, “our citizenship is in heaven.”

 Commentator Ralph C. Wood explains this concept even further (FOTW, p. 66) He says that when Paul says our citizenship, our commonwealth, is in heaven, he is not making a “sentimental otherworldly promise.” He goes on to explain:

 *On the contrary, our bodies (and therefore our earthly lives) are so*

 *essential to our souls (and their spiritual lives) that the two cannot be*

 *divided. We are ensouled bodies and embodied souls. We can obey Paul’s*

 *call to “stand firm in the Lord” (4:1) only by following the way of the cross,*

 *only if we are seeking here and now to begin the union of our bodies and*

 *souls . . .”*

Indeed, we are “spiritual beings having a human experience!” Paul describes it this way to the Philippians in v. 21, he says that Christ will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body, . . .”

 In an article entitled Brave Spirits which was printed in the “DailyOM” a webpage of inspirational thoughts for a happy, healthy and fulfilling day (dailyom.com) in 2022, the author expounds on this idea that we are “spiritual beings having a human experience” by saying that, as such, we are on an important mission to learn and grow here on earth. The author goes on to say:

 *As spiritual beings, we are visitors in this physical realm. The fact that*

 *we came here and lost all memory of what happened before we were born*

 *is one of the many reasons that it takes so much courage for a soul to*

 *incarnate on earth. This is why spiritual inquiry so often feels like*

*remembering—because it is. Remembering that we are spiritual beings*

*is part of the work that we are here on earth to do. When we operate from*

*a place of remembering, we tap into the wisdom that our spirit accumulated*

*even before we stepped into this lifetime. Remembering who we are can give*

*us the patience to persevere when we become overwhelmed or frustrated.*

*It can give us the courage to work through the most daunting challenges and*

*help us trust the ancient wisdom we carry that is offered to us by our*

*intuition.*

We are all only visitors here on earth. Our citizenship is in heaven with “Our Father which art in heaven” and so while we are here, we must “stand firm” in our faith and always follow the Holy Spirit, which **IS** our ancient wisdom in the form of what we naively call “our intuition.” Amen.

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