

CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
Philippians 3:17-4:1

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Until the summer of 2005, the only foreign country I had ever spent time in was Canada – a country where the language and customs are very similar to ours. But then came a mission trip to Mexico, and then one to Russia. Unlike even my Reformation Trip last fall to Germany, Switzerland and France, where it was not unusual to run into people who spoke English, and where signs, menus and other information were often printed in English, the places I spent time in Mexico and Russia were very different. On those mission trips, it was not common to find others who spoke English or materials printed in English. Communicating was sometimes difficult because the interpreter was not always present, and some of the customs and food were also difficult to get used to. Yes, it was exciting to be in new places, to meet new people, to experience the common bonds of faith and being human, and to experience the blessing of helping others, but if I had not been with others who shared my language and customs, the whole experience might have felt a lot more scary and lonely.

Whether you have been to a foreign country or not, I invite you to imagine yourself walking down streets where all the signs you see are written in a language you cannot read and where the language you hear spoken is one you cannot understand. There is no tour guide or interpreter, so if you are lost and need directions, it would be difficult to communicate your need, and even if you did you likely would not understand the response. If you pass by people and hear them laughing you would have no idea why. If you hear them yelling out with a sense of concern and urgency, you would not know how to respond. It would be very clear that you are an outsider – a stranger in a strange land.

Even though my mission trip experiences in foreign lands were completely my choice, it's about as close as I can get to what it might have been like for the people of Israel to be in exile far from their home. Exiled life makes up a significant chunk of the Old Testament, and exile is the context for today's prophetic lesson. Behind every word of Jeremiah is a somber fact – God's people have been cruelly uprooted, plucked up, transported, without choice to the foreign country of Babylon. They are strangers in a strange land.

So what do you do in such a situation? Should you be defiant? Should you clench your fists, refuse to learn the language, keep yourselves separated and untainted by Babylonian ways and customs? Perhaps, it would be best to just give in and blend in. But the prophet Jeremiah does not hear the Lord telling Israel to simply adapt to where they live and blend in with the Babylonians. But then again, Jeremiah does not hear God telling the Israelites to howl in despair, to build walls and hide behind them. So how does a person of faith live in a foreign land without compromising the core values of that faith? How does one live in and associate with a community without completely blending in with it? Well, the fact is, it wasn't easy then and it still isn't easy today.

After all, a little compromise here, a little compromise there, and before you know it, full assimilation has taken place. Not unlike those exiled Israelites in Babylon, we Christians are under almost constant pressure in our society to compromise our faith and blend in. We do this by the language we use, by the choice

of activities we give our time and energy, and by the self-focus that determines so many of our decisions. We do this by our constantly busy schedules that keep God at the periphery of our life. Society exerts a tremendous amount of pressure on us to conform and to adopt to whatever practices are popular, and since most of us children and adults alike want to fit in and to be liked by others, we give in to those conforming pressures.

When I was growing up in the 70's, attending the Mayfield schools, I eventually became aware that some of the kids in my classes did not share my faith; in fact, they were of another faith – the Jewish faith. But I was a kid, so I didn't really think a lot about what that meant. When I was in High school, twin Jewish girls became a part of my extended group of friends. Those girls sang in the same choirs, played in the same band, joined and participated in the same Girl Scout troop, and were invited to many of the same parties that I attended. It was only late in High School and in particular my college and seminary years that I began to think more deeply and I started wondering what it might have been like for them every year when at our Christmas concert the A-Cappella choir sang the "Hallelujah Chorus" as well as various arrangements of Christmas carols. I, of course, loved the songs; I experienced them as beautiful and inspiring. And yet, in so many subtle and not so subtle ways, I now realize those Jewish friends were asked to compromise their faith. If they chose not to participate, then it would have been necessary for them to drop out of choir, to skip school Christmas parties, and to turn down invitations for holiday parties at the homes of friends.

I think that we contemporary American Christians are now able to better identify with what our Jewish friends and other minority groups have experienced for centuries. Many of us grew up thinking of America as a "Christian country." Being a Christian was the normal, natural, American thing to be. But that's not the case today. When you came to church this morning, you were among a minority of those from your neighborhood doing so.

Gallup poll findings from the 1950's showed that only 6% of American adults had absolutely no religious training. That figure has steadily climbed to where it is now well over 50%. That means that more than half of all teenagers and adults have absolutely no religious training in their background, no Christian, no Jewish, no Muslim, no any other religious training. Some of these may label themselves as Christian, but with no formal training and no noticeable practicing, that label has little meaning. In many of our lifetimes, the American church has lost its "home court advantage" not to another religion, but to the forces of secularity. On any given Sunday, the American population represented at a Christian worship service is only between 10-20%.

So, what do you do when you are the minority, the outsider? Well, says Jeremiah, you make the best of it. You acknowledge that you are in exile, a "stranger in a strange land." You also acknowledge that something is at stake in the way you invest your time and in how you spend your money. Something is at stake in the words you use, the activities in which you participate, in the values you live by and the priorities you set. You live where you are, but you live without compromising who you are.

Jeremiah says to plant a garden, this activity is significant because it shows investment and longer term commitment. There may be many in the community who do not worship the God whom we worship, but we still build houses and have children. We pray and work for the peace and well-being of the community. We are not told to separate ourselves from society, but to remain strong in our faith as we live in and

improve the communities in which we live. We acknowledge that this is the world in which God has placed us and we must live in this strange, ambiguous world with faith. Yes, it is confusing as well as challenging, but this is what exiles are called to do.

I want to share with you quotes from a letter that was written in the second century when the church was very young. The letter said, "Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs... Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each (one's) lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth. They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land... It is true that they are 'in the flesh,' but they do not live 'according to the flesh.' They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is clearly in heaven."

The Apostle Paul in Philippians makes this same point when he says, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (3:20). And then Paul follows it up just two verses later by reminding us to... "stand firm in the Lord..." (4:1).

So, have your neighbors noticed lately that there is a foreigner living in your house? Those of us who identify ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, are challenged by today's scripture lessons to examine ourselves. Are we compromising our faith and failing to reveal our true citizenship? Are we personally doing everything we can to be informed and to grow in our knowledge and faith? Are we doing everything we can to nurture and train our children in the Christian faith? Can others even tell that we are Christians, "citizens of heaven?"

Many who have immigrated to the United States over the years have certainly experienced great blessing as citizens of this country, but I have read that they have also experienced a great sadness and it has to do with what feels to them like the loss of their children. For as their children grow up in this culture, they naturally want to blend in and so they stop learning the old language and practicing the old customs.

I think that a very similar sadness is true for many of us adult Christians today. I would like to think that all of the children in this United Methodist Church will grow up determined to live as Christians and to bring up their children as Christians. Unfortunately, the statistics do not support that hope. Of course, it doesn't take statistics for us to see that truth for ourselves. Of course, we want our children to know that Christians live and work and invest in our communities; we enjoy sports and various other activities; and yet, what we don't do is blend in to the point that our true citizenship is no longer apparent.

Difficult challenges are placed before Christians today. Forces are regularly exerting their influence upon us, trying to pull us away from the practice of our faith. Often those forces are so subtle that we barely notice the long-term influence they are having on us. As Christians, we struggle to find our footing – we struggle to forgive when others shout, "hold onto grudges"; we struggle to love when so many are telling us to hate; we struggle to serve others when we are being told to serve ourselves; we struggle to trust in God when fear is so strong; we struggle to grow spiritually through the practice of our faith when others are telling us that worship and prayer, study and Christian fellowship are not important.

And yet, in the midst of these influences and our struggles with them, God reminds us of who we are. Through Christ's example we are encouraged to stand firm

as Christians in our community. Yes, we busy ourselves on earth; we set down roots and invest in our communities, but we do not compromise our faith. As Christians, we are to bear witness to the fact that we are first and forever, "Citizens of Heaven." Amen.