***Where Are You From?***

Sunday morning, January 24, 2021

Text: Philippians 3:17-24

Where are you from? This is a question with which we’re pretty familiar. It’s one that we have used over and over, although maybe with a little less frequency lately. I read this week that this past Thursday marked the one-year anniversary of the first case of Covid-19 in the U.S. But, if we can remember back before all of this hit us we would remember that we used to say this quite a bit right here in the church foyer. Visitors would come and we would shake their hands (aah, I miss the old days) and ask a series of questions: “who are you?” and “where are you from?”

We ask that because there is something about them that lets us know that something is different about these folks. Think about a church like ours. We know who is usually here, who belongs here and who is new. We may not know everyone’s name, but we know if they *belong* here or not. “I can’t remember their name, but they sit over there about half way back on the south side.” Or “Who is sister so and so?” “You know, they sit toward the front there in that middle section usually behind the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s.” But when we encounter someone who doesn’t seem to be one of the regulars we’ll say something like, “Now, tell me your name. Glad you are here with us. Where are you from?”

Think about what prompts that question. We’ve already talked a little about it. Appearance. Some of the time this is more obvious than at others. Sometimes we can tell right away that someone is not from around here. I remember trips to El Salvador that we used to make before all the travel restrictions. From the looks that we get as we travel on the bus from San Salvador to LaPalma it seems like most folks there know that we ain’t from around there. I remember the looks that my boys would get, particularly Josh. He’s about 6’3” fair skinned, blonde with blue eyes. You don’t have much trouble picking him out of the crowd down there. People knew right away that he wasn’t a native. I see pictures that Steven Ashcraft has with his preaching students from Africa. It doesn’t take long to pick out which one Steven is. Appearance can surely prompt the question, “Where are you from?”

Language is something that will definitely let people know you’re not from their neck of the woods. One of my favorite old TV shows is *The Andy Griffith Show.* There’s a character that shows up a couple of time in the old black-and-white seasons named Malcolm Meriwether. As soon as Malcolm opens his mouth with his heavy British accent, you know right away that he’s not from Mayberry. I remember the scene of Barney talking to him at the courthouse and then turning to Andy to say, “I don’t think he’s from around here. He must be from somewheres else.” A few years ago during one of our trips to El Salvador the preacher there, Jose Castillo, gathered up our team along with their teenagers and sent us out in groups to invite people to come to the events we were having at the church that week. There would be one or two of us Americans with three or four of the teens from there in each group and we had certain areas in town where we were to go and hand out these invitations and to personally invite folks. They even taught us how to speak this invitation to the people we met. I don’t know for sure how it went in all the groups, but I can tell you that when it was my turn to go up and knock on someone’s door to invite them, it didn’t seem to take them long to figure out that I wasn’t a native. I’m sure the appearance was a give away, but when I spoke it removed all doubt. They were definitely not used to Spanish being spoken in a hillbilly accent. Language, even if it is the same, can still give away the fact that someone is not really one of us. As our area becomes more diverse as we have more and more people moving here from different parts of the country and the world, we in some cases immediately realize that they are not from here. So we ask, “Where are you from?”

I think we ask this question because we are looking for common ground. We want to relate to others and this seems to be a great way in which to do that. How many times have we asked that question, or have been asked that question and the answer moves the conversation forward. “Where are you from?” “Well, I’m from up around Springfield, Missouri.” “Really, did you ever go to Bass Pro Shop? I love that place.” Or, “I know some people up that way. Tell me more about where you used to go or what you used to do……” We look for commonality. We look for belonging. We want to see if the relationship, the friendship, the acquaintance can grow.

We have a need to belong. We have a need to relate to one another. There’s not much that is more unnerving, or uncomfortable than to be in a place where we immediately realize, “We’re not from here.” Where we realize that the way in which we normally conduct ourselves, the way we normally carry out our day, live life is not the way it’s done where we find ourselves. Think about waking up tomorrow in a completely different culture. Where the things you thought you knew and of which you could be sure were suddenly foreign to many of the people around you.

The Christians in Philippi are in a difficult spot. Philippi is a major city in Macedonia, located on the main road from Asia to Rome. It is a Roman colony populated in large part by Roman soldiers who have completed their duties to the Empire. It is a place where many different gods and goddesses are worshiped. It is also a place where the Roman Empire – or former Roman Emperors – are worshiped as deities. There are patron gods of trade guilds, temples and idols of all kinds. And those who have come to Jesus, those who were converted, now find themselves in a place where they suddenly feel like foreigners. I imagine that there were people that these Jesus followers knew who were wondering where they were from. “Didn’t we go to school together? Didn’t our kids play soccer with their kids? Didn’t she used to be in our group?”

I’m not sure how we picture the church there, but it would have been a very small minority of the people who live there. How were they going to survive and grow?

Have we ever been there? Do we ever look around us and think, “I don’t belong here. I thought I knew this place. Just a little while ago everything seemed so normal, everything seemed to make sense. But now, it just doesn’t seem right. The way I think seems to be foreign to most of the people around me. I don’t understand the way they speak, the way they live.” How are we supposed to navigate this? How are we going to move forward? How are we going to survive in this type of hostile, foreign place?

Paul knew what it was like to be in that situation. Paul who had been a devout Jew, who was now a follower of Jesus knew exactly what it was like to wake up in a place he thought he knew, only to not fit in there any longer. Paul’s initial visit to Philippi has surely been a topic of discussion among the Christians there. Luke tells us about this visit in Acts 16.

Philippi is a place where Paul didn’t want to be. After the split up of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15, Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia. They picked up Timothy as they went along, and eventually Luke meets them. Paul wanted to go to Asia, but God said no. Then he wanted to go to Bithynia, but God said no. Then a man from Macedonia appeared to Paul in a dream asking for help, so Paul and company went. Philippi was used to having people who weren’t from there, located where it was. When Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke arrive they are probably looked at as other strangers passing through. Paul probably looks for the local synagogue so he can be ready for the Sabbath, but there’s not one there. When he finds the group of women outside the city who are praying to God, Paul tells them about Jesus and some (at least Lydia and her household) became followers. The group stays with Lydia for a while in town and Paul meets a girl that notices that he’s not from there. She follows Paul and Silas declaring, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” She seems to do this quite a bit to the point that Paul says, “Enough!” He casts the spirit of divination out of her. Once those who were making a living off of this poor girl figure out that the money train is empty, they take Paul and Silas to the officials where they are stripped, beaten and put in prison. We may be pretty familiar with the rest of the story. Paul and Silas chained in the prison singing. The earthquake releases the chains and opens the doors. The jailer ready to kill himself. The conversion of the jailer and his family.

It is the next part that I want us to notice. The officials are going to release Paul and Silas, so they send the jailer to let them know. Paul says no. Actually here what he said. *“They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.”* I wonder if this is what Paul wants the Philippians to think about when it comes to this language of citizenship. Paul reminds them that citizenship has privileges, even in Rome. Roman citizens were afforded some things that foreigners weren’t. It is my understanding that those city officials who ordered the beating of Paul and Silas, uncondemned Roman citizens, could face pretty stiff penalties if pressed. Paul knew this. Paul will bring up his Roman citizenship again in Acts 22. There, Paul was grabbed by the Jewish officials on the charge of taking a Gentile into the temple where he was not supposed to be. This mob is about to tear Paul limb from limb, when the Roman soldiers step in a rescue him. When the crowd gets stirred up again, the soldiers carry Paul into the barracks to find out where he’s from. Now, it’s not like they have a greeter inside the Roman barracks to grab Paul by the hand and say, “Hey, good to have you here. My name is Claudius. Where are you from?” They are not going to run down to the corner and pick up some coffee and bagels and sit down and get to know Paul, where he’s from and what he’s doing. They only know one way to get the truth and that is to beat it out of Paul. He’s not going to lie if we we’re scourging him. But as they get ready to start, Paul says, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” That course of action is stopped immediately.

I think this is what Paul may have in mind as he writes from prison to the struggling church a Philippi: “*Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.*

Paul, as he writes from prison, reminds the struggling little church in Philippi, the ones who have been partners with him in the kingdom, the ones who are finding themselves in a place that is no longer home that their citizenship is in God’s kingdom. The citizenship that Rome grants cannot compare to the citizenship they have in heaven. Those who rely on Rome’s citizenship alone will be destroyed. The Christian citizenship is granted by the one who is over all including Rome. Citizenship in heaven is promised by the One who is eternally faithful and who makes it possible to live in his kingdom with him forever. The church in Philippi needed to hear this.

The church today needs to hear this. We here in Bella Vista need to hear this today as much as the Philippians needed it then. As we have all kinds of things pulling us, pushing us, pressuring us; as we have all kinds of groups shouting and all of the things swirling around us, we need to be reminded of where we’re from. We need to remember where our true allegiance and our loyalties lie. We need to be reminded of the inheritance that has been promised that is ours. We exist in this culture for the sake of this culture, not to assimilate to the culture. Just like the one we follow. Jesus is not “from” here, but came here for the sake of here. He calls us to do the same. In his prayer recorded in John 17 he says, “*I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.* ***7*** *Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.* ***9*** *I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

*“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:6-21)*

We know (don’t we?) that we don’t really belong here. We’re not really from here. There is something within us that is pulling us, calling us homeward, to where we really belong. Paul tells the Christians in Philippi, “I know what you’re up against. I know the pressures that you are facing. I know you don’t feel like you belong, you feel disoriented in what was once home to you. That’s good! You shouldn’t. You’re not from here any more. You’re from someplace else.”

What about us? Is there something about us that tells us and others that we’re not from here? Are there things about us that make people wonder, “Where are they from?” How about our appearance? I don’t mean that we have some kind of radiant glow, or that we have halos over our heads, or we wear long robes with tassels on them. I mean where do we appear? Where do we show up? Are we with those whom the world has trampled? Are we where Jesus would be? How about our appearance in the middle of all of the divisiveness and turmoil that is constantly around us? Do we appear calm and confident in the fact that our citizenship is in heaven? Does we way we react to the news of the day communicate that we are part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken? Do others see this in us and wonder, “Where are they from?”

How about our language? I don’t just mean the absence of foul language. But, how we speak to and about others, ALL OTHERS, tell those around us that we’re not from here? Are we living as citizens whose allegiance is to the King who saved us? Or, do we live like our ultimate allegiance is to this country, our city, our way of life, our bank account?

Where are we from?

Invitation