

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 14:13-21

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalm 145:8-9,14-21

Romans 9:1-5

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The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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This past week I have been thinking a lot about the definition of citizenship. More specifically, I have contemplated what it means to be a Christian citizen. Webster's Dictionary defines citizen as an inhabitant of a city or town especially one entitled to rights and privileges; or a native or naturalized person who owes allegiance to a government and is entitled to protection from it. Likewise, citizenship is the quality of an individual's response to membership in a community.

In other words, the official definitions give us insight into what we should receive as a citizen (rights and privileges) and it tells us, not specifically how to behave, but it does tell us that we owe allegiance to the place we call home. Allegiance meaning simply that we have devotion or loyalty to our home county or state or country.

The trouble with those definitions is that we are left asking ourselves, what does devotion and loyalty look like? If citizenship is the quality of our devotion and loyalty, then how do we judge quality? For me, these terms fall flat...too general to have any kind of wide ranging consensus...especially in the divided times we find ourselves. And that flatness of interpretation is becoming a scapegoat for the work that is begging for our time and attention.

So this morning, I want us to consider our understanding of what it means to be a citizen, a good citizen, through our lens of faith. As Christians what do we learn from Jesus about being a quality citizen? What does devotion and loyalty truly look like?

I am going to suggest that it is the difference between self-preservation and community restoration. Self-preservation vs. community restoration.

Let's look closely at our Gospel reading from Matthew. It starts with the words, "Now when Jesus heard this..." As background, what he had just heard was the awful news that his beloved friend, John the Baptist had been killed. Jesus was devastated. And so, he goes away to mourn, to take care of himself, to be alone. But in his respite, he notices that crowds of people were following him. He saw they were in need. They were sick and hungry. Then, we are told he had compassion on them.

But, in order to help them, Jesus had to put aside his own needs, his own grief, his own self-interest and enter into the crowds, to be surrounded by people desperate for his love and care and desperate for his desire to take responsibility for helping them. He steps up the plate and steps away from his need for self-preservation.

Yet, his disciples don't want him to get so involved. They don't want him to take responsibility for these people. They tell him, Jesus, it's late. Send everyone away. Let them take care of themselves. But, Jesus says no, they will not be sent away. He tells his disciples to give the people something to eat. No excuses. No hesitation. It is then that we see the real work begin. What we see is compassion. Compassion that results in taking radical responsibility for one another. And all were cared for. That's community restoration.

Here's something else that is important to understand about our faithful interpretation of citizenship...when Jesus had compassion on the people, the text conveys a compassion that is not in any way a superficial expression of care. The Greek verb for having compassion expresses a deep, heart wrenching emotion, a visceral reaction that drives Jesus to help. It's the kind of compassion that changes who we are as human beings, that brings in to a singular focus what needs to be done and leaves us no other option than to put aside our own needs and desires to make sure others are safe and whole. We can do no less.

That's the lesson our faith teaches us about being a good citizen. Jesus could have focused entirely on himself, he could have stayed in that deserted place and ignored what was happening around him. In fact, the disciples encouraged him to do so; but instead, he turns his attention to his community. Self-preservation vs. community restoration.

There is no litmus test of eligibility. There is no wall keeping people out. There is no lack of resources. There is no discrimination towards who is more worthy of getting the help that they need. Jesus had just said in Matthew 11...*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

And now, we see what that looks like in real time. To me, this is what being a Christian citizen is all about. It is the heart of our values and it is what guides our understanding of the quality of our devotion and loyalty to this earth which we call home.

In a recent article in the Christian Century, Rev. Bailey Pickens, a Presbyterian minister in Tucson, Arizona describes citizenship this way...

*"We care, of course—but responsibility is not reducible to care. This is important and easy to miss. Many of us care very much about other people, even and especially the vulnerable and suffering, who are especially dear to God. But the notion that we bear real responsibility for others'..., runs so counter to our culture's emphasis on individual responsibility for individual outcomes that even recognition of systemic causes often stops short of recognition of shared accountability for systemic effects."*

Rev. Pickens goes on to say, *"God has counted every hair on each of our heads, but living is still a group project. Scripture provides little warrant for the comfortable among us to believe that we will not be called to account for the hardship and distress of others. And rare indeed these days is the comfort that does not come at someone else's cost."*

The point is that our comfort, our inaction, our need to preserve our own self-interest is never an isolated endeavor. We are always bound to one another in the mutuality of creation and as Christians, that mutuality means something very specific in regards to our citizenship.

Now, Rev. Pickens acknowledges that in the world we live in, we will certainly disagree and thus have different interpretations about how the quality of our devotion and loyalty should look but that in no way does disagreement opt us out of our connection to others.

We can't opt out.

In other words, there are no excuses not to act in a way that supports unconditional community restoration. As John Lewis stated in his final letter to all of us, *"it is human compassion that lays down the burdens of division."*

Let me leave you this morning with a few questions from our Baptismal Covenant. If you are still wondering what citizenship looks like, I hope you will find some direction here.

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

This is community restoration.

And to each of these questions, we respond...I will, with God's help.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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