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### **Knowing Home**

**Texts:** Philippians 3:20; Genesis 15:7-21; St. Luke 13:31-35

A little over twenty years ago, I had the great good fortune of spending a good part of the summer in Paris. My chief purpose in being there was to work on a research project at the Bibliotheque Nationale, but I also used the time to work on my French language skills. And of course, I spent a lot of time on numerous forays about town to learn as much as I could about one of the most wonderful and beautiful cities in the world. Time spent away from one's family is lonely time, yet, other than having this very big hole in my life, I actually became comfortable both in French and in the city of Paris. I knew that I felt particularly at home the one morning I left my apartment and was approached by a woman who asked directions. Not only did I understand what she said to me, I also knew exactly where she wanted to go and was able to give her unerring directions in French. Never mind that later on during the same morning walk, I was approached by another woman who, I thought, was asking directions to the rue de Bac, and who when I started to give them, recognized my accent, switched to English, and gave me directions to a shrine of the Virgin Mary on the rue de Bac, an institution for which she was evangelizing. Indeed, never mind; for a moment I had felt comfortable and no longer like a total outsider that morning; a simple mistake wasn't going to take that away from me.

It was also during this time in Paris that something important dawned on me, and that was that I am, at my root, an American; not a hyphenated American, not a cosmopolitan,-citizen-of-the-world-who-just-happens-to-live-in-America-American, but an American for better or for worse. This is hardly a revelation, and may well be something that anybody would think that I

should know. Of course, I always have in one sense. But the new sense I had of my national identity was something more like this: I did not find this sense of who I am and where I come from to be something that made me feel more foreign in a foreign city. It made me feel more comfortable, for it was a sense of having no particular concern about being a foreigner, which I would always be there. I didn't feel awkward with who I am; I didn't have to try to be French to fit in. Nor did I use this new, deepened sense of identity to resent the French, a people I have always rather liked and felt comfortable around; it was not an occasion to find them odd or peculiar, or wish that they were more like me. Rather, I simply felt comfortable in my own skin. I felt in conversations with French friends that I had no reason to give advice to them on how to live, but I also felt that I had a distinctive point of view to contribute, which I, nevertheless, didn't have to insist upon as being necessary or universal. It was simply who I am.

It was during this sojourn that I also had a second, similar experience, but one that was even far more important to my sense of who I am. Each Sunday while in Paris I walked about three miles to the American Church in Paris. Now I had every reason to feel comfortable there since a lot about it was familiar. The church was built by the same architect who had built the church I grew up in in St. Paul and the buildings looked a lot like each other. The service was remarkably similar, too; besides that, it was in English and I knew the hymns. But the sense I got there went far beyond that cozy familiarity. It, too, involved a sense of identity. I knew, I felt, then, that no matter where I was in the world, that I was a Christian and belonged among Christians. If being in Paris convinced me that I was an American, being in a Paris church convinced me that whenever and wherever I was in a church I was at home.

People sometimes will say that they belong to a particular religion because they grew up in it, and opine that had they grown up in another one they would probably be practitioners of

that other religion. Maybe; nevertheless, during this time in a foreign city, in a church that belonged in this foreign city, I felt that I was at home. It is a feeling that since then I have had in Christian churches in many other foreign countries, in many other states, and in the sanctuaries of other denominations. It was a feeling I had one Christmas when, in Princeton, with a number of colleagues from other countries we sang “Silent Night” by turns in English, German, Dutch, Norwegian, Afrikaans, and Portugese.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul tells his readers that “our citizenship is in heaven.” What does he mean? Well, I think, what I experienced in a church in a distant land was, in fact, a matter of coming to understand what he meant. For what Paul means is that if we are aware of that citizenship we have in heaven, that, in the words of the old saying, we will know who we are and whose we are. That means, for example, that we know, as a matter of course, how to discern what is Christ’s and what is Caesar’s, that we can distinguish between the light and the darkness, and that we know the difference between the voice of the Good Shepherd and the mere hireling.

But it is also a matter of knowing that in this world, and in *any* of the kingdoms of this world, whether they are ancient Rome, or contemporary America, or anywhere else, that we are, in the words of the ancient Christian martyr, Diognetus, simply “resident aliens” in those kingdoms, and not ultimately their citizens. Now, knowing where our citizenship really is, and where we are simply resident aliens means a couple of things. It means that we know that we are wanderers and far from home. It means that even though we are living somewhere else, we have not forgotten where we really belong. And that means that no matter how friendly we are with the natives, we still do not become one of them. Knowing that home is elsewhere also means that we are always looking for that home. Thus there is a always certain restlessness to our faith

because of where our real citizenship is and because we are not residing there yet. As St. Augustine's famous prayer put it, "you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

Our father Abraham is the great example of what it means to be such a resident alien. He was given the promise of a home and of being the father of a great people, yet he wandered everywhere but in his promised home for the latter part of his life. Yet, in his wanderings he never forgot where he really belonged and where he was headed; he thus continually resisted the temptation to put down roots somewhere other than where he belonged. He refused the gifts and blandishments of pharaohs and kings, and kept his eyes on the promised gift that God was giving him. During Lent, he especially ought to be a model for us, as we, too, seek to know where our real home is, and to distinguish what belongs to it and what doesn't. For this is a time of setting our faces to home.

But even if we are resident aliens, that shouldn't make us distant or uncaring. If we are not to identify with homes that are not really ours, that we are not, let it be said plainly, citizens of this world or any of its kingdoms, still that does not mean that we are to turn our backs on them. If we need to resist the temptation to identify with a home that is not ours, there is also a temptation to be resisted of paying no attention and giving no interest to the place where you happen to be wandering. For example, when twenty years ago I discovered that really deep down I was an American, it didn't mean that I lost interest in France. It was quite the opposite. I saw it with new and fresh eyes. Knowing who I was actually gave me a new way of being in a foreign country and of appreciating their way of being. So, too, knowing that our citizenship is in heaven ought to give us a new way of being in the world. We do not ignore the world or turn our backs on it. This is something that can help us to understand how to deal with other religions.

Discovering that we really are Christians, and that indeed we do believe that all are saved by the Word of God made flesh isn't an imperative to lose interest in others or to persecute them or look down on them. As Simone Weil once pointed out as an analogy in this regard, a truly original artist doesn't feel jealous when he walks into a museum filled with masterpieces. If he is truly a genius and truly original, he will be able to appreciate genius and originality elsewhere, too. Such ought to be the way with matters of the Spirit.

So if having citizenship in heaven means that we are not to turn our backs on the places where we wander, let us recognize our citizenship in heaven is something that leads us to stand up, it leads us to *stay* in the world in certain ways, even if we are wanderers in it. Think, for example, of our Lord as he is described in this morning's Gospel lesson. A group of Pharisees warn him that Herod wants to kill him. What is his reaction? It is not flight. That would be an entirely understandable reaction, especially if he thought that Herod's policies had nothing to do with his kingdom. Why not flee if it would mean he could go on teaching really important stuff somewhere else? But Jesus knew the demands of his citizenship. He knew that being a citizen of heaven, and dwelling in a land where they had regularly killed prophets meant that if he were to be true to his calling he would have to go and suffer and ultimately die. That was his way to be in the world, for his way of being in the world, his citizenship in heaven demanded that he care about a world and a city that didn't care enough for itself. And he did care about it, wishing to gather its children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Now I think there is a very good and simple reason for why, if we know that our citizenship is in heaven, we can wander and suffer and die here in caring for places where we are not citizens. There is a reason for our caring, especially if we know that our home is with God, even at the same time that we do not identify ourselves with these places. That reason is that if

you know who you are, and where you come from and where you are going that you are free to care. When it dawned on me in a deep way in France that I was an American it was actually a freeing thing. I could suddenly appreciate the French for who they are without having to be one of them. It also meant that I was free to give to friends there something of myself. Similarly, to know where our real home is, to know that by God's grace we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and that his father is ours, is to be free to care about a world that is not our final home. Because nobody can take our real citizenship away, excepting ourselves if we should become like natives of the lands we live in, we are always free to be our spiritual selves.

We need to get clear on who we are and whose we are, an exercise that should be undertaken by all of us during Lent. The church in America sometimes seems rather confused on this, and as a result it has been dying spiritually by inches. To reverse that we need to get clear that being American and being Christian are not the same thing. That insight applies both to those who mistakenly think that America has a special destiny different than any other nation, and to those who think that we need to tailor the gospel to what Americans find appealing so that they will enter our churches. In both cases, that confusion, even if it brings in numbers, is deadly for it takes away our very identity which is rooted elsewhere. It forces God to fit our understanding, and does not elevate our understanding of God. It changes God for one of the gods. And in this respect the prophet Jeremiah's words to Judah are appropriate: "My people have changed their glory for something that does not profit."

Still, if we need to get clear on what we are not in order to find our true homes, we are not exempted from caring. We need to get clear on the fact that if our citizenship is in heaven, that we need to act as citizens of heaven in the lands in which we dwell. We need to be helpful guests. Our real citizenship does not make us distant; in fact, it should make us more committed

to doing something more for the land than its own citizens often do. And indeed, if we truly act as the citizens of heaven that we are supposed to be, we will do more for the land than its citizens alone can ever do, for we alone may be able to show them what the love and fellowship and caring and loyalty are that alone can really bind humanity together in a community and ultimately bind humanity to God. We alone whose home is elsewhere may be able to teach them of a bond that stretches beyond the boundaries of narrow self interest and comfort.

During this Lent, let us take time to understand where we ultimately belong. Let us recognize that it is God's country alone that claims us, and indeed has claimed us since our baptisms. But let us also know that that citizenship is something that means giving of ourselves in all the places where we wander. And if we do so give of ourselves, be assured that you will reach the home that is truly yours.