

Dual Citizenship: We Are People of a Story

Luke 4:16-21

Maybe it's just a lapse in my memory, but I don't remember ever being reminded to vote as often as we are hearing it this Fall. From every side of the election that's happening right now, people are telling us how critical it is to American democracy that we exercise our right to choose who will lead this country. That's because voting is right at the core of what we believe to be true about the United States of America; that ultimate power belongs to common people. You can wiggle your way out of jury duty. You can avoid the census until they come and find you. But vote: this you must do. Every adult citizen of this country has a not just a right, but a duty, to participate in this ritual that—for all the casting doubt on it—we still believe will be free, and fair, and open to just about everyone. To be a citizen confers on you some rights, but it's also about living with a sense of responsibility for the country that is yours.

Being a citizen is different than just living in a certain place. Citizenship confers on us an identity. It names us. I am an American, and that makes me different from someone who is French, or South African, or Brazilian. It's also different from membership in an organization. We have room for multiple memberships in our lives; you can belong to Los Altos United Methodist Church and your college alumni association, and the Rotary Club all at the same time. Citizenship is different. Most of us carry just one citizenship, because it signals an almost-ultimate loyalty. It's powerful, and it's a powerful influence on who you are.

I have a friend who is a citizen of both the U.S. and Canada; he's a dual citizen. I talked with him the other day about what that means for him. 'I feel like an outlier,' he said. 'I'm conscious all the time that I'm different from my friends who are American only.' Consciously and unconsciously, he's aware that the country where he was born—Canada—holds a slightly different set of values than the U.S., where he took vows of citizenship as an adult. As a Canadian he internalized politeness in all circumstances, a quiet, live-and-let-live sort of community with just about anyone. As an American, he's learned to compete for success and status, his place. Most of the time he can blend these two sets of values, choose for himself the better side of both nationalities. The beauty of dual citizenship, he said, is the freedom to step to one side or the other, at least internally, when those two citizenships bump up against each other, when their claims on him pull him in one direction or the other.

Christians too live as dual citizens. We are a people who live with our citizenship in the world *and* we are followers of Jesus, citizens of what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. In the next few weeks, we're going to be talking about what it means for us to live with this dual citizenship, a foot in both kingdoms. What happens when our commitment to live the values that Jesus talked about—compassion, generosity, forgiveness, unconditional grace—bumps up against effective, successful citizenship—in this country and in the world. I want to know: Is there any visible difference between the lives of ordinary people and dual citizens—people who have made the choice to live as though the Kingdom of God Jesus talked about is real, and true, and here among us right now?

A religion—any religion—is known for what it does. The way it bends the lives of its practitioners, the claims it makes on their hands and feet, their hours and days, their effort, their attention. Beliefs can be claimed and shuffled to the side. They can be explained away; exceptions can be justified. But the way we live, the acts of our lives: those are visible, undeniable. The Christian faith we claim, this alternate citizenship we take on when we are baptized—just like American citizenship, it demands our participation. Christianity was not meant to be a safe room, a comfortable shelter from the storms of living in the world. It's a charge, an accountability to something that is bigger than ourselves or our family. We make a commitment, and then we live it. Sometimes it changes our thinking, and our actions, demands something other than what comes to us naturally. It's supposed to.

Each week in this series, we'll look at a distinctiveness, an indelible mark that comes with citizenship in the Kingdom of God. A characteristic that doesn't take us out of our 'real' lives, but that's supposed to change the way we act, and think, how we respond to what happens to us, and to what happens in the world.

Today: *We are people of a Story.*

It's a story so old and enduring, that even Jesus didn't write it; he just stepped into it. You heard its outline a few minutes ago as we read from the first sermon that Jesus preached when he started his ministry. He didn't make up new words or write a new story; he found his place in *the Story*. God has sent me, Jesus said,

*to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release—freedom—to prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed.*

To say to all of them, *God sees you. God is on your side.*

This is The Story. It's a story God wrote; I know that because when Jesus said those words he was quoting someone else. Isaiah, who spoke for God hundreds of years before Jesus came along. This was God's Story from the very beginning. Played out when God chose a small tribe of slaves—Israelites—to free and to stay with them all the years they were lost in the wilderness. It was God's Story when God began life on earth that first Christmas in a scrappy outbuilding in a town where his parents were strangers. It was God's story when Jesus' family fled to Egypt, refugees seeking safety from persecution.

The Story tells us what matters to God. Who matters. Who gets God's attention; and because of that, who is entitled to our attention, our respect. Whose value cannot be measured by profit potential, or utility, or cost-benefit analysis. Which is to say: everyone's.

The Story says that every living thing has full, unquestionable value, no matter how useless or unattractive or dispensable they look in the eyes of the world. The Story says the power of the universe bends *toward* the obscure, the insignificant, the wounded, the most readily rejected. In the Story, God always acts on the side of the smallest, the least capable. Again and again, God forgives debts, frees slaves, heals the sick, empowers the weak.

In this Story, gifts are poured out indiscriminately—like seeds scattered carelessly on rocky soil, among weeds, or where the birds will eat them. Only a few will sink good roots, grow to full flower. This is not efficient or cost-effective farming. In fact, it looks totally wasteful. Wasted time, wasted effort, scarce resources lavished on people who are unworthy, untrustworthy, unnecessary, sometimes ungrateful.

This is *not* how we have learned to make the world run profitably. But the Story imagines a different economy, an alternate citizenship.

We are people of *that* Story too.

What happens when our two citizenships bump right up against each other? When their values collide; when we're in a position that requires us to choose between aligning ourselves with The Story or living in a way we sometimes think of as more realistic?

I think most of us toggle back and forth, usually without even thinking about it. We know The Story; most of us can even tell it. But sometimes we act as if that's for someday, not now. Surely God never intended business-minded people to act impractically—employers, property owners, creditors. No one actually expects us to act like Jesus all the time, right?

I think that's what the Good Samaritan story is about. Those two busy people who crossed the road to avoid dealing with guy who'd been mugged—they knew The Story. They knew what compassion would ask of them. It just wasn't their first priority; other commitments came first in that moment. Only the Samaritan stopped and tended to the bleeding man as if that were the only thing he could do, the only decision he could make.

Some years ago, for reasons I can't even begin to remember, I picked up a memoir written by John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach from UCLA. No doubt many of you know far more than I do about the success of John Wooden's basketball teams. Here's the one thing I remember from that book: Wooden said UCLA's dominance of the sport came because of his insistence on fundamentals of the game. He drilled those fundamentals into his players. One of the distinctive things about a Wooden team was that every time a player—on either team—took a shot toward the basket, every UCLA player had to have both hands up, ready to catch the rebound. Every player. Immediately, without hesitating to think first about where the ball might come down. When new players joined the team, often they resisted that part of practice. It felt silly, to run around with your hands up in the air no matter what position you played or where you were on the court. But Wooden drilled that reaction into his players; every day they practiced it. The ball went up toward the basket, and UCLA hands went up, above their shoulders, ready for whatever happened next. So by the time those players got to a game, that action came instinctively. They never even thought about it.

I don't really care much about how you win basketball games. But I love the image of those players with their hands up in the air. It reminds me of the way Christians are supposed to live: with our hands out, open, ready to give ourselves away without calculation, just the way God

does. Just the way we are practicing in our life together. We are practicing our citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

That hands-out posture seems unrealistic, impractical, for citizenship in the world we live in most of the time. But The Story insists that the world doesn't have to be the way it is now.

That Story is also our citizenship. It is meant to act on us. To not leave us alone; to leave an impression on us that lasts long after its words have been spoken. To give us another identity, even—no, maybe especially—when that makes us outliers, different from everyone else.

Credit and appreciation: Many of the thoughts for this sermon came from my reading of a book called *Sacred Signposts*, by Benjamin Dueholm.