

Sermon Text: I Peter 2:9-12
Liberty Sunday

July 3, 2016

You are a Holy Nation

Our cross-cultural ministry work here in Las Vegas – particularly that with the African refugee ministry – has given me a renewed appreciation for the blessings we enjoy as citizens of these United States of America. Most of us may take issue with illegal immigration – and rightfully so – but that doesn't make all immigrants law breakers. The U.S. welcomes right around one million legal immigrants into the country every year. And this isn't just a 21st century phenomenon. Immigration has been a major factor throughout the history of the U.S. In 1882, for example, over 800,000 people immigrated to the U.S. legally. In 1907 that number rose to nearly 1.3 million.

In fact, I believe it's safe to say that not a single one of us would be here today were it not for our parents or grandparents or great, great-grandparents having immigrated here from another part of the world. We have members in our congregation who are among the over 40 million Americans who are first generation immigrants themselves. And, of course, our Korean and African ministries are filled with them.

Why? Why do they come here? And why are there 100 or even 1000 people lined up behind each of those who do make it, who wish they'd be chosen to immigrate here? The answers vary, but perhaps it could be summed up by a young man I met along the beach in Monrovia, Liberia. He said, "America is heaven."

Now, you and I know that America is far from heaven. The streets are not paved with gold; it doesn't rain rubies. We have plenty of crime, sickness, sadness, and sin. But to a person who lives every day fearing for their lives or barely having enough food to minimally survive or surrounded by and/or infected by disease and death, America certainly seems like a lot like heaven.

I bring this up today, not to make a political statement. Not to make you feel guilty for all the blessings we enjoy and probably usually take for granted as citizens of the U.S. And not even really to make you feel appreciative for all those blessings this Fourth of July weekend. I bring up the issue of immigration to lead you to appreciate another immigration each of us here has been blessed to be chosen to enjoy . . . and that is the spiritual immigration into the Kingdom of God. As Christians, You (and I) are a Holy Nation. I. We belong to God. And therefore, let us II. Live for God.

The Apostle Peter was inspired to write: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (vss.9-10).

To help you appreciate what a blessing – what a miracle of God's grace! – this is, let me remind you from Scripture what you were. Peter says that at one time – by virtue of our births into this world as sinful human beings – "you were not a people." What does he mean? Well, the Bible says we were "dead in transgressions and sins." We were spiritually lifeless . . . as far as God and his justice were concerned, we were "not a people." The Bible says we were "enemies of God" (Romans 8). In the book of Ephesians, the Lord says of us: "remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (2:12). "Excluded from

citizenship” in God’s spiritual nation / in God’s Kingdom; “foreigners” to his gospel promises of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. You had no rights to them. You had no access to them. You were on the outside looking in, wishing for peace, wishing for God’s love, wishing for the certainty and hope of eternal life, but only experiencing sin and guilt and destined for eternal death. You were enslaved to Satan, confined to his kingdom of darkness, misery and death, led to believe that you were living in freedom and for yourself, but in reality being used by Satan for his devilish purposes. And there was absolutely nothing you could do to escape. You were “without hope” – having no real hope or chance of things getting any better.

Most of the people who live in war-ravaged or miserably impoverished countries or communities don’t really have any hope of getting out. The daring ones take matters into their own hands and risk their lives to escape, often ending in death. The majority come to resolve themselves to the fact that this is just the way it’s going to be and attempt to eek out some kind of existence. And a handful of lucky ones – fortunate ones – “win the lottery” as they put it. They are chosen out of millions of applicants to be accepted as a legal immigrant into our country.

Praise God today that you are one of the fortunate ones . . . one of the chosen ones. And I’m not talking about you being a U.S. citizen. I’m talking about your spiritual citizenship. “You are a chosen people . . . a holy nation, God’s special possession . . . the people of God.” In his grace – his undeserved, unconditional love for you – God “called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.” According to the book of Colossians, God “has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:12-14).

The Apostle Paul put it this way in the book of 2 Thessalonians: “God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:13-14).

Here in Christ’s Kingdom, you are a holy nation. You are part of this holy nation – “the Holy Christian Church” - not because you qualify as having lived a holy life, but because “God has qualified you.” You are holy, because Jesus lived a perfect life for you and God has credited you with his righteousness, his holiness. You are holy, because God removed your sins from you and placed them on Jesus, who suffered and died for them in your place. There is no guilt here within these borders of Christ. No regret. No fear of God’s punishment. There’s only peace within these borders. You now belong to a holy God. And he treats you, not as slaves or as servants, but as a son or daughter. And will do so for all eternity.

One of the things, I believe, that makes many Americans upset about the whole immigration issue is that – at least it is perceived as such – that more people in the country means there’s less for the rest of us. Less time – because the streets get busier, the lines get longer at the DMV, the grocery store and the doctor’s office. Fewer jobs. Less of just about everything to go around because there are more who are after it.

Regardless of how true that is or how much of that really affects the lives of most of us, the fact is that when it comes to citizenship in God’s Kingdom and being members of this holy nation, we need not fear that we will ever have to go without. The Bible uses words like “lavishes us” and “overflowing” and “abounding” and “welling up” to describe God’s generosity toward us. There are no limits and no fear of running out when it comes to things like God’s

love, his forgiveness, his strength, his answers to our prayers, or his availability. You belong to the one and only true God, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, present everywhere all the time.

We didn't have to – nor could we – do anything to be chosen by God or become a part of this holy nation of his. But now that we are citizens within his kingdom, the Lord would have us live for him. “Dear friends,” the Apostle Peter writes, “I urge you, as foreigners and aliens, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (vss.11-12).

As citizens of this holy nation, live good, God-pleasing lives. Do good things, God-pleasing things. And avoid sinful, devilish things. “Abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.”

One of the other things that gets people upset about immigration – legal or illegal – is when someone who comes into our country comes simply to mooch off our society and its citizens and makes no effort to contribute in a positive way. Obviously, those who come to hurt or harm us as terrorists or even common criminals are not going to be liked. But so are those who come only to be put on welfare and receive free medical care and other benefits of citizenship, but have no intent and make no effort at doing anything positive or productive for themselves or our country.

Likewise, the Lord is not pleased with those “Christians” who simply want to enjoy the benefits and blessings of being citizens of Christ’s Kingdom, but who make no effort at contributing to the work of the Kingdom. “Faith without works is dead,” the Bible says. We are not saved or brought into the Kingdom by our good works, but once in the Kingdom – by God’s grace through faith in Christ – God does want us to do good works . . . out of love for him and in service to those around us.

The Bible says in the book of 2 Corinthians: “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (5:14-15). We are compelled – not by guilt or duty – but by love and gratitude to love God. And that love will evidence itself in the effort we put into abstaining from sinful desires – saying no to sin and temptation and sinful personal pleasures. The Bible says in the book of I Corinthians: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (6:19-20). That love will also evidence itself – not only in staying away from those things God wants us to avoid, but also by engaging in those things God wants us to be a part of. That love will evidence itself in the effort we put into loving the people God places in our lives.

Now here’s where our lesson reminds us that as citizens of Christ’s Kingdom – as members of this holy nation of his – our spiritual citizenship will at times conflict with our citizenship in the world, even in these United States. Peter calls us “foreigners and aliens.” He says that we live as holy people “among pagans.” And that these pagans – unbelievers – will “accuse us of doing wrong” when what we are doing is right before God. You know what I’m talking about. Calling sin a sin (like lust or pornography or greed or homosexuality or living together without being married) – this makes you a bigot in the opinion of many in the world

today. Being against abortion or speaking out against false religions or false teaching makes us “haters” in the eyes of the world. Even loving certain public sinners (or elements of society that many people don’t like – like people with a criminal background or immigrants – legal or illegal) and reaching out to them with the gospel – even going so far as to be willing to forgive the public sinners and welcome them into our church – will lead some to “accuse you of doing wrong.”

But do these things anyway! Why? Because they are right. They are God-pleasing. And deep down inside, many people know that - in spite of what they might say or do themselves - that the things we do in love for the Lord and for those around us actually are “good deeds.” And God will be glorified because of us.

So live for God. Let go of any anger. Let go of any animosity. Let go of any bitterness and any long held grudges. Let go of sinful pride and abstain from sinful desires. Reciprocate Christ’s love. Reciprocate his mercy. Reciprocate his forgiveness.

By God’s grace, you are a holy nation. You are a citizen of the eternal Kingdom of God. Defend your spiritual freedoms and exercise your spiritual citizenship in love for the one who made it all possible for you. You belong to God. Live for him. Amen.