

TURNING IN OUR PASSPORTS

JOHN 17:1-11

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

The years 2012 and 2013 were record years for American's renouncing their citizenship. The expatriates, as they are known, have given up their U.S. Citizenship for various reasons, number one being for tax purposes. Some political pundits had threatened to turn in their passports if President Obama was reelected, but they never left. It must be hard to abandon the country of your birth, especially if you have to learn a new language, adapt to a new culture, and celebrate all new holidays.

A few weeks ago nine of our youth joined the church by going through the process of confirmation. During the service they were told: "Beginning today you will become equal citizens, participating equally in the journey of faith we take together. Today, we recognize that you are participatory citizens and full members in this household of God." They pledged their allegiance to God, to be followers of Jesus Christ, renouncing the evils of this world and to work for justice in God's new kingdom. In other words, they renounced their citizenship in this world and became citizens of God's kingdom.

Jesus creates a new identity for his followers. We're getting a new passport. We're not allowed dual citizenship. Jesus essentially is saying, "Okay, you are citizens of another world now. You have a new passport. You're going to be living now in a foreign land. It might even be a hostile culture. I am going to ask the Holy Father to protect you as you live as heavenly citizens in this temporal world."

If you have ever visited or lived in a foreign country, you know how easy it is to stand out. Natives usually know you a foreigner by how you dress, your skin color, your smell, how you talk, and so many other ways of standing out.

As members of God's kingdom, how do we stand out? Do those who are not part of God's kingdom see us as like foreigners? We may not dress any different, but are our values different? Is our approach to life different? Do we think differently? Do we act differently? Do we talk differently?

When I was living in Texas 30 years ago I had a professor who had lived in Texas his whole life, but he worked hard not to talk with a Texas accent. He said he didn't want others in the field to look down on him, so he tried to maintain a neutral dialect. It's hard not to adapt to the prevailing culture around you. When

people come to this country they are encourage to assimilate quickly into our culture, adopting our language, mannerisms, lifestyle, and eating habits.

As Christians, we become citizens of the kingdom of God. As Christians we are to live counter culturally, living as children of God instead of blending in to our culture. It is difficult to be a Christian in a culture of materialism, self indulgence, and instant gratification. Our glory is not to be found in the accumulation of wealth or the possession of power, and our gods that we worship are not in our jobs, economic or social status, or anything else in this world.

We must remind ourselves time and time again that our identity is not found in the things of this world. Our identity is found in Christ, and our citizenship is in God's kingdom. The old Christian hymn said "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through." While we are here, as resident aliens, we need to remember that we have been called to live under the authority and rule of Christ.

When our youth went through confirmation recently, they were asked to select a mentor to guide them through the process. The mentors were their role models. We learn to live as citizens of the kingdom of God by being imitators of those who are faithfully trying to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We don't learn to be followers of Jesus by merely reading about him in a book, or even by reading about the saints of old. We learn by observing others around us, in our church, who are dealing with the same struggles that we are, yet who manage to live faithfully, though not always perfectly.

So whom are you following? There are plenty of good role models I can think of in this church who are worthy to be imitated. Sure they are flawed, so what, we all are. Some of my best role models are deeply flawed. Some of my role models are older and they hold on too tightly to tradition, but they are still my role models. Some of my role models are young people full of idealism though not an ounce of common sense, but they are still my role models.

A more difficult question to ask is who is following you? Who is observing your life, using you as a model to follow? A spouse? A child or grandchild? A neighbor? An employer, a fellow employee? They may not be looking to see if you are perfect, but they may be watching to see what direction you are headed.

You are here for a reason. You are resident aliens, members of God's kingdom, passing through this land as foreigners. You have surrendered your passports and you are learning a new language, a new culture, new habits, and new ways of living. Until we are called home, let us embrace our status and be followers of Jesus in the way in which we live.