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The National Presbyterian Church

Great Ends of The Church: “My Fellow Citizens Sermon”

Ephesians 2:13, 17-22; Colossians 1:11-14; Daniel 2:31-45

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This morning we come to the end of a series of sermons in which we are thinking together about Christianity and its corporate dimension; Christianity not just as an individual relationship between “me and Jesus” though it needs to be that: if it’s not individual, well it doesn’t really add up to much, it must be that. Jesus knew individuals, he knew them by name. But we’re thinking together about Christianity in its corporate dimension, about the fact that when Jesus calls individuals to follow him, he always summons them *together* to create a community, to create ultimately *the church*. Sometimes we think of the church as just merely a good idea, an appendage to Christian faith, as if it were somehow our idea “Hmm. I have a relationship with God. I think I’ll go to church because this is what I need to do today!” But it’s more than that. It’s far more than that. It’s bound up with who Jesus was and what he taught from the very beginning. He summoned people to come together. He deliberately created a community. To his friend Simon Peter he promised that on the confession of his name as the one who was the Lord of all, the Christ, the Son of God he would “build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

So we’re thinking of this corporate dimension of the church – what we can do together that we cannot do by ourselves, what we can be together what we cannot be by ourselves. And we’re doing this with the help of a group of six statements that come from our Presbyterian heritage called *The Great Ends* (or great purposes) of the Church.

1. The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind
2. The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God
3. The Maintenance of Divine Worship
4. The Preservation of the Truth
5. The Promotion of Social Righteousness, and
6. The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World.

We’ve looked at five of these Great Ends so far, and we come this morning to the sixth and last of these Great Ends: *The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World*.

Let me begin with a word of explanation about the phrase, “The Kingdom of Heaven.” It means exactly the same thing as the phrase the “Kingdom of God.” The word “heaven” here is used as a “circumlocution,” that is, another way of speaking about the name of God. The Jewish people often didn’t want to use the name of God, the word God, because it was so holy. Sometimes to this day a Jewish writer will write “G-D” instead of the word “God” because the name is so holy. So you avoid the name and you use another name or part of the name, and

“heaven” is another name for God. So the Kingdom of Heaven is not just about the realm that we enter when we die. It is the “realm of God,” both now and later.

The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. We have been called to exhibit it here on earth, here and now through the church to the world! People are to see it, it is *to be exhibited*, they are to see the Kingdom of Heaven through you and me, our life together, to see it. Not just to be convinced rationally of its existence (though we Presbyterians tend to move into a default argument for “the case” of the Kingdom of Heaven), but to see, *demonstrated within our lives, that there is another realm, there is another ruler more important, more powerful commanding and demanding and expecting our allegiance more than any other ruler or rule, any other realm, kingdom or king, to which we have signed on:* the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. This is your calling and mine together.

Go back 70 years or so, and you’ll find President Roosevelt seeing the existence and the importance of at least *three realms of belonging* in his British counterpart, Winston Churchill; *three allegiances*. Their relationship was critical for the success of the Allies in World War II. But it was a relationship which was built on these multiple allegiances, and almost collapsed because of one of these allegiances.

Some of you know, others of you may have forgotten or may not remember, that Winston Churchill’s mother was an American. He had his foot in two camps –his foot was clearly placed in the camp of the British Isles. This was the realm, the kingdom, to which he primarily belonged.

But on the other hand he had a foot in another realm on *this* side of the ocean, here in the United States. Unlike many aristocrats in Britain of his day, he loved both realms. If his mother hadn’t been an American do you know what he might have been like? He might have been like Violet Crawley! Violet Crawley, the Dowager Countess of Grantham in the TV series, Downton Abbey – who when it came to entertaining her American relatives, if she could even force herself to say that they were “relatives,” would find her nose turning up in contempt! An aristocratic snob – toward just about anyone and anything, but especially Americans! Churchill, the aristocrat, could easily have been in her camp. But he wasn’t because his foot was in two kingdoms, through his American mother. This love clearly strengthened his relationship with Roosevelt and the United States.

But then there was another realm where Churchill had placed his foot – and that other realm almost destroyed his relationship with Roosevelt. The other realm was the whole realm of the British Empire. Churchill belonged to the Empire. It was in his blood. And consequently, part of his goal in winning World War II was to preserve the Empire – which was very, very far from Roosevelt’s goal. Indeed, Roosevelt was happy to see the Empire’s demise – and so he was determined, even as he helped Churchill and Britain, to do nothing that would help the Empire survive. These varying allegiances almost brought their relationship to an end, and certainly complicated their relationship along the way.

So these multiple allegiances, realms of belonging, within individual lives – exhibited in both lives, but especially in Churchill’s without shame or embarrassment, affected everything of significance that they did. Which is true for you and me as well.

We all have these kinds of relationships and bonds. They may not be quite so graphic as they were for Churchill, but they are all there for better or for worse: rulers and realms to which we belong and to which we give our allegiance, sometimes overtly and sometimes in secret; sometimes we are aware of the allegiances, and sometimes we are not – we don’t even know ourselves at times “to whom we belong” and why we’re giving our allegiance to one or another.

But this sixth Great End of the Church forces us to ask this question of our life, or to frame our lives in this particular way, by making us ask: “*What realm and what ruler do we belong to? To whom we give our ultimate allegiance above all others?*”

- There is, of course, our nation – we give our allegiance to our nation.
- There is, too, our family – and we give our allegiance to our family.
- In the family there might be a patriarch and a matriarch who is the ruler of that family (a sort of King or Queen!).
- There is our race (or tribe) to which we give our allegiance as well: Black or white? Northern or Southern?
- There is our college, our school to which we give our allegiance. And sometimes that can be very, very strong and powerful indeed.

But the point is this – that these realms exist, and are powerful factors in our lives, and we have to ask ourselves “What is the realm we belong to? Who is the one to whom we give our allegiance? Maybe the answer is like Churchill: maybe there are multiple allegiances in our lives! But then the question is still this: which is the realm above all others which commands our ultimate allegiance? *And is it the realm and the rule of God made known in Jesus Christ the King of Kings?* Is it the realm and the rule the king and the kingship and the kingdom of God above all others?

It can be a hard choice and decision to make in our lives – to decide between these competing realms, within which we live and to which we give our allegiance. This is no small thing for me and I think probably with some of you who are here today we’ve actually had to face this in a very concrete kind of a way in terms of our allegiance to one nation or to another.

Fourteen years ago I transferred from one kingdom to another, from one realm to another, and gave my allegiance to this nation, to the United States when I became a naturalized citizen. That was 14 years ago, it took me 20 years of living in this country to make that decision. You may say “Well, you’re just a slow decision maker – and that may be the case! – but it was really because of the *oath of allegiance*. Not all of the *oath of allegiance* but part of the oath.

I don’t know if you know what the oath of the allegiance is or what it involves, but much of it I could have sworn faithfully to uphold very soon I suppose after I arrived in this country.

- *I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies foreign and domestic.*
- *I will bear the true faith and allegiance to the same.*
- *I will bear on behalf of the United States when required by the law.*
- *I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law.*
- *I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law.*

I could take all of these obligations and affirm them freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion. But the first one was my stumbling block. The first one says this:

- *that I absolutely and entirely renounce and ordure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen.*

That stopped me in my tracks – *that I absolutely and entirely renounce and ordure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen.*

If I said that I would have felt as if I was betraying my heritage, betraying my upbringing, betraying my family, betraying my parents. I wasn't sure I could do it, until one day I had the equivalent of a conversion experience. I can remember the day and the moment. I was in the city of London. I was running through London to catch a train to catch a plane. This was during the first Gulf War and I was late for my plane; flights were being cancelled left, right and center. There were very few people willing to fly at that time. I was willing to fly (perhaps because as a true Scot the air fares were really cheap). But I was scared in that moment that I was going to miss my plane and if I missed my plane then I wouldn't be able to get back . . . home. And I realized that I was saying it: that this side of the ocean was now "home," and that changed everything. Home had changed from *that* side of the ocean to *this* side of the ocean. The family that I had to be with was no longer on that side of the ocean. The family I had to be with, my wife and my children, were on *this* side of the ocean, and this was where I had to be. And while it still took me (because I'm a slow decision maker!) a few years to take the final step, right there and then I knew the step that I had to take, and I could without hesitation or embarrassment, or doubt whatsoever, "renounce all foreign princes, potentates, states and sovereignty" in order to claim a land and a realm and an authority that was new.

And this is what we've been called to do with the Kingdom of God, with the Kingdom of Heaven. The mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that comes to us so freely from God is not just a mercy that forgives our sins and forgives our guilt, and then leaves us to say "I can go my merry old way." No! This is to miss the point. The purpose of our forgiveness is that we now can belong to God within a relationship that has been healed and restored.

So God says: "Here's the barrier between you and me: your sin. Let me remove it, not just so you can be free of guilt, but so that you may enter my

Kingdom. The doors are open, flung wide open, and I invite you in, I invite you to eat at my banqueting table, to take your place here in my Kingdom. And I count on you to give to my Kingdom your ultimate allegiance above all others.

Hear again part of what we read in Ephesians, and (first of all) Colossians:

God has rescued us from the power of darkness and has transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son in whom to be sure we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins.

But this is only, as it were, the first step to the healing of a relationship which has been broken and a community that has been destroyed and is to be restored. So listen again to Ephesians 2:

“In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near to God by the blood of Christ so then you are no longer strangers and aliens. [DR: “Aliens” is another word for immigrants. No longer do we have to carry a Green Card. No longer do I have to do that. I’m in.] But you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Jesus Christ underneath us, the solid foundation of the castle in which we live; and Jesus Christ is above us as the King to whom we give our ultimate fealty, our ultimate allegiance.

Is this the way you think of yourself? Do you think in these terms? Think of yourself living within a realm, under an authority? Or within this nation, but under the authority of a higher realm? a higher king? a higher kingdom? to whom we belong above all else: above nation, above tribe or race or family? Bound together by this king and this kingdom that unites us powerfully?

A citizen of another realm. See unless we think that way individually then we’ll probably never think that way corporately. But we’ve been called to think that way corporately – “The King and I” (to use the musical title) is not a kingdom. It’s only “the King and us” which makes the kingdom! But you’ve got to start with “The King and I”. And then we come together so that it is “The king and us”, powerfully exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

In recent times the clearest demonstration to me of the church functioning this way and the power of this way of looking at things comes from Poland in the 1980s where the Communist state said we have complete control over your life (“We’re the only realm, the only kingdom, that matters). But 95% of the Polish people belonged to the Catholic Church (a different realm!). So that within the state there was another state, within the realm there was another realm, within the kingdom, as it were, there was another kingdom to which the people gave their ultimate allegiance, and which gave them courage to resist oppression when the moment was right – but only because they did not give their ultimate allegiance to the wrong king or the wrong kingdom.

Or, go back to World War II into Nazi Germany, and you’ll find much of the church was sleeping as Hitler’s power grew. And I fear that *I* might have been sleeping too at such a time, saying wait a minute, “To be a faithful German and a faithful Christian, these are all wrapped up

together.” But there were some Christians who said “Oh no they’re not. I can be a faithful German, but the way I’m being a faithful German is by being faithful to my, my King. Not to the kingdom of Germany (the 3rd Reich simply means the 3rd Empire or 3rd Kingdom) but to the God the King who reigns above all other authorities. What a risk they took. Read through what’s called the Barmen Declaration (www.creeds.net) within our Constitution as a Presbyterian Church to see these faithful German Christians wrestling with this issue: Who has ultimate authority? What realm do I ultimately belong to? And they conclude: we have no King, no Lord, no “Word of God” but Jesus.

Or go back in scripture to the book of Daniel perhaps more than any other book in Scripture – where Daniel gives his allegiance as do his friends to the empire of Babylon, the secular enemy. They are senior civil servants! They play their part within that nation, as Jeremiah calls all of us to do (Jer 28:7: “Seek the welfare of the city to which I send you”). But when push comes to shove, and the nation itself and its ruler become like “gods,” Daniel and his friends say “*NO! There is only one kingdom that lasts forever and I am a citizen of that kingdom under the authority of the eternal King.*”

Every Sunday we pray in *The Lord’s Prayer*, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.” One way to begin the answer that prayer is to be determined to *Exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the World* – “exhibit” – not rationally prove – but effuse or demonstrate as Churchill did, that we belong to another realm . . . to make that other realm so much a part of who we are that our allegiance cannot be hidden; so much a part of “us” until we impact the world around us.

Great purposes. Great ends! The last of these: *the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.*

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