

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Come From Away"
Dr. J. Dent

February 28, 2010
Second Sunday in Lent

I've been learning a few Newfoundland expressions since I first came here in 1981. Perhaps you have as well. I am still learning. But one of the things I was asked or told on my first visit, was that "since I was from away," "where was I from?" Being somewhat of a linguist, at least in my own mind, and according to the fact that I had received a Bachelors degree in the field, I thought I would begin thinking about this. This is something I think I often do.

Lynn later explained that even when you grow up here, once you go away and come back you get your CFA, which is a kind of a badge. I suppose everyone here knows what a CFA is, a "come from away" designation. But I still struggle with the question, "Where are you from?" This in part expresses my liminality, the state of being in between states. But that is for "where I'm to" and another sermon. Let's get back to "where I'm from." If I'd say Pasadena, as it says on my passport, most will tell me that I'm not telling the truth. If I'd say California, I'd be given a reaction of why are you here then, or simply how difficult I must find the weather here. If I'd said that I've lived in six provinces, but originally was from California, most of the time people would accept that, no matter how they felt about Americans (particularly today with the game tonight).

But if I say my ancestors are mostly from England and Germany, two generations ago on my father's side and three on my mother's, that usually wouldn't satisfy someone here. Apparently saying what I thought my racial roots are doesn't answer the question, "where am I from?" So I went back to saying I grew up in California, and prepared myself for what might come after, nothing difficult to hear, just not feeling understood. Many of you know what that feels like.

So I was thinking about how the Lord Jesus must have felt when he was explaining where he was from. I think this might have been quite a difficult exercise for him. Because when he was home, he had all kinds of difficulty with those who felt they knew all about him. Surely this was the carpenter's son, and nothing more! And many of you who grew up here can know the challenges of people thinking they know all about you, even though they

don't. And there are many other challenges in staying in the place you went to school and where your family, your many family members live.

Abraham faced many challenges when he felt he heard God say to him that he needed to leave his family and all that was familiar and go to a foreign place that God would show him. God promised him a great big family and that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. But then he and his wife couldn't conceive a child. So he felt like all the promises of God would be left with all his physical possessions to the steward of his household, Eliezer of Damascus. He was worried a "come from away" would get what he hoped his own family would receive from God. God did come through later with a miraculous birth of a son in their older age. And you know that story. It is mainly a story of trusting God, and lots of people receiving the benefit from that trust.

Meanwhile, Paul explains that trust it in a different way. He is contending for the faith of the people of Philippi who are having a hard time getting along with each other. There are some that are saying that you need a certain racial and/or ancestral background to really be a part of the people of God. (See Philippians 3: 1ff) But Paul says "no" to this, and "yes" to the idea that all believers really have a "come from away" identity. He uses the idea of citizenship as a way to talk about our identity as believers in and followers of Christ. We are citizens of heaven.

Paul notes that there will always be people who oppose the idea of Jesus' cross and resurrection. There will always be those who oppose the basics of Christianity, i.e. bringing us as individuals and as a community into relationship with God by accepting what Jesus has done for us. Those people who oppose this Good News he calls "enemies of the cross of Christ." But at the same time for all of us who do embrace the Good News that Jesus Christ took the penalty for our sins and now invites us into relationship with Himself as Lord and Saviour, he invites us to think of ourselves as citizens of heaven.

Citizenship is not something all of us have taken a lot of time to consider, unless of course, you have moved from your native land to another, and have looked at the criteria for becoming a citizen of your new land. To be a citizen is to enjoy the rights and privileges of voting, taking up political office or working for any level of government, local, provincial or federal. In fact, when I became a Canadian citizen, the officer of the Order of

Canada in Kelowna, BC told us we need to get as much as possible out of this new status. Enjoy the freedom to travel, the right to work for the government and the privilege of voting. And all these things were true and good. I was only disappointed because he mentioned nothing about the responsibilities of citizenship. He mentioned nothing of what we as new citizens were to sacrifice to serve this nation. He mentioned nothing of what we might see we might add to Canada. He mentioned nothing of what imagining yourself as Canadian does for your sense of identity. He mentioned nothing of what we might be giving up in order to take on this new identity.

And Paul does not elaborate on what he means by “citizenship in heaven.” Paul would say in other places how we are to take up our crosses and follow Jesus. But here he merely attempts to point out that we have a primary duty to God and to Jesus as we live this life. We have a primary identity in God’s household, much more than any racial, ancestral, class or status here on earth. We have a foretaste of heaven, as we see Jesus contending for health and life, for truth and community based on what he has done. We have a foretaste of heaven as we experience the safety of a community that allows, even strongly encourages us to tell the truth about ourselves, faults, sin and all. We have a foretaste of heaven as we receive the love, grace and mercy of the people of God who know Jesus’ forgiveness and care. We have a strong identity given to us as we seek to establish and acknowledge our citizenship in heaven, with all the rights and responsibilities that such gives us. So we are in fact, “come from away” as Jesus came from away to give himself for us.

This is not cause for pride or arrogance. This is simply noting what is true. It is true that we have a heritage in Jesus Christ that we have in no other way and no other place. Lent is a time to explore our spiritual heritage. Jesus does want to gather us as a hen gathers her chicks. This means we can hope to enjoy a great deal of friendship and companionship as the body of Christ across denominations. It means we continually need to see one another as God looks at us, with love, with compassion, with a sense of mission for good, for truth and reconciliation.

I know that my father-in-law has said many times that Newfoundland is God’s country. I believe this is true. But it is also true that there is a place where every tear is wiped away, where there are leaves for the healing of the nations and where a river flows that brings life that never ends. In that

place, where God is visibly present we find a place of reunion and reconciliation with many people that might surprise us who are there and perhaps many absences that might surprise us as well.

All we can do here today is to affirm and reconfirm that our true citizenship is in heaven. "God has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8, TNIV), or as Bruce Waltke has translated in his new commentary on Micah, "to practice justice and faithful love and walk wisely with God..."

This week is the week to consider what it means for you to be a citizen of heaven. What does it mean this week to bring down a little of heaven to this existence of ours rather than raising a little hell. How can we make life better for those around us? How can our church community do such?

You know we have our Annual Meeting after the service today. This is your chance to reflect on these vital questions. And as we do, may God receive the praise and us the blessing, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray.