The Culture of Heaven

Philippians 3:7-21
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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Last week, the new issue of *Leader* magazine showed up in the church mailbox. This is a quarterly publication of MennoMedia. It contains articles on the Anabaptist world, culture, and often contains some of the worship resources we use in the seasons of Advent and Lent.

I didn't look at it, just threw it on my desk and filed it in the "to be dealt with later" file in my brain (this is a rather large file!).

This week, I picked it up and looked at the cover. There was a sky-blue background, a church steeple, a cross on top. And the words: "**Can we talk… politics?**"

I'm not going to lie, my first thought, upon reading that title, was, "Oh dear God, can we *not*?!" I may have literally, audibly said the words, "C'mon, MennoMedia editors, read the room!"

After the last five years or so, there is little that I can imagine wanting to talk *less* about—in church, or anywhere else—than politics.

We've just been through the spectacle of a Donald Trump presidency which divided and inflamed people in ways that I cannot remember anything else doing in my lifetime.

Even though Canada is not the USA, we consume so much American media that we seem to almost absorb their issues as our own.

And for four years, it seemed like many people could talk about little else than Donald Trump. He was an outrage machine. Indeed, I suspect he kept certain media outlets afloat all by himself, so dedicated were they to cataloguing and condemning his every move.

Back when I was on social media, I remember seeing people from my most conservative to my most liberal friends posting almost constantly about Trump and what he meant for the world. American politics became the grand narrative that gave life meaning.

Indeed, many have noted that politics has *become* religion for many in the hollowed-out landscape of the increasingly post-Christian West.

And now we've been through a year and a half of a global pandemic, which has been heavily politicized almost since the beginning.

In the early days, maybe March and April of 2020, there was a sense of solidarity in the face of this unknown threat. But as the pandemic unfolded, and as governments began to have varying responses, and as there was yo-yoing back and forth between open and closed and masks and no masks, people began to divide.

It has divided families and friends. I know that you know this because some of you have told me yourselves. It has divided churches and communities.

And now, we seem to have an election that nobody wants looming here in Canada. More politics. Hooray.

So, after half a decade of the Trump spectacle and all it signifies about the state of our discourse, after all the polarization that it revealed (which has not gone away), after all the political anger that this pandemic has generated, and with the prospect of more mud-slinging and accusation of another election cycle on the horizon, many of us are flat out exhausted by politics.

I am, at least. I don't know about you. Maybe you have a higher pain threshold than I do. But the very last thing I want to do more of in church is talk about politics.

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So why on earth *am* I talking about politics? Why have I spent the first five minutes of my sermon talking about this? You might rightly be wondering at this point.

We are on our second to last sermon in our summer series on the book of Philippians and the theme of joy. And politics certainly doesn't *seem* to have much connection to joy!

I am thinking about politics today because of one verse in our reading this morning:

> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil 3:20).

Our citizenship is in heaven. That's an interesting phrase. What does it mean?

Does it provide justification for avoiding the messy world of politics and other this-worldly concerns? Is it just the kind of passage that people who are worn out and wearied by our political discourse might take refuge in?

It certainly has been used in this way throughout Christian history.

This passage has often been taken to mean something like "this earth/this body are a kind of necessary evil that I must endure until I get to my real home which is heaven."

Is this what it means to live as citizens of heaven? To always be looking up and never out? To stand idly by this world and its concerns, pining instead for our mansions in the sky?

I don't think so.

One of the main voices that has convinced me of this over the years is that is that of the British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright.

In his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Wright comments on this specific verse from Philippians. He argues that in reminding the church in Philippi that their "citizenship is in heaven," Paul is drawing a parallel with the nature of citizenship in the Roman empire.

According to Wright, citizenship in Rome did not mean that Rome was the place you really belonged; rather, it had to do with what you sought to make a reality where you already were:

> The point about citizenship is a point about status and allegiance, not about place of residence… Those who were granted Roman citizenship in non-colonial cities… would certainly not interpret that as a standing invitation to retire to Rome in due course. The logic of colonies and citizenship works the other way round… [The Roman citizen's] task was to live in the colony by the rules of the mother city, not to yearn to go home again.

This has a rather obvious application to how Christians are to view their "citizenship in heaven." Just as a Roman citizen in Philippi would be expected to spread the influence of Rome—its customs, language, currency, religion, etc— in the context of eastern Macedonia, so the citizen of heaven ought not to pine away for their heavenly "home," but seek to bring the "culture of heaven" to their present home.

In a sense, we bear witness to this truth whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Wright puts it like this:

Christians should live in the present as members, already, of the world that is yet to be.

Wright's interpretation of this passage reminds us of an important truth. The earth is not simply a prison that we must endure on our way to heaven which is what we were *really* made for. Our earthly existence is just an unfortunate detour along the way to the sweet by and by.

We are made for the earth. We are made for life. We are citizens of heaven. There is nothing contradictory about these propositions.

For Wright, they simply reflect the fact that our home is not yet as it should be—that the "culture of heaven" has not yet sufficiently permeated it. The citizens are not doing their job.

And, unfortunately for people like me who are tempted to avoid politics like the plague (no pun intended), all this means that we can't just disengage from this world and our shared lives as human citizens.

I should hasten to add that this understanding of citizenship in heaven has an awful lot to say about *how* we engage the world of politics, and it certainly offers a stern rebuke to those who make politics their new religion.

Many people today—those who are not Christians and, unfortunately, many who are—have pretty much transferred all the hope and energy and desire that was once reserved for religion into the political realm.

And, even more unfortunately, many people today—those who are Christians and those who are not—have jumped headlong into a toxic and polarizing narrative of heroes and villains and winners and losers, where everyone who's not on our team is an object of suspicion and derision, not a fellow citizen and child of God.

But escapism is not the answer. Citizens of heaven are also citizens of this earth because we believe that one day the two will merge into one.

What will this look like? We have hints, but we don't know for sure.

We often have difficulty imagining what "heaven on earth" would actually look like or how it could ever arrive.

But I think we know enough about where our citizenship lies to genuinely desire its arrival, and to spread what little of its aroma we can wherever we are.

We only have to read our bibles and pay attention to our what we crave deep down in our bones (there is a connection!).

The culture of heaven is one of peace, justice, wholeness, harmony. It is a culture where fear is finally and decisively overwhelmed by love.

It is a culture of patience, of kindness, of faithfulness and fidelity. It is a culture of generosity in the face of our tight-fisted instincts.

It is a culture of self-sacrifice and upside-down values, where the beatitudes fully and finally disrupt "business as usual," where the meek actually *do* inherit the earth and the hungry are filled with good things.

It is a culture where the outsiders are given the honoured seat at an overflowing banquet table. It is a culture where there's always a party and where the wine flows freely.

It is culture of mercy and forgiveness that has the power to heal all of our violent and vengeful ways.

It is a culture of beauty and creativity that transforms all that is ugly and stifling in our world.

It is a culture of eternity in contrast to that which is always passing away.

It is a culture of joy, where human life is lived to the full.

This is the culture that we are to bring to the outposts in which we live. This is what it looks like, sounds like, smells like, tastes like, *feels* like when the culture of heaven begins to infiltrate this tired old world.

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And so we press on toward this goal. We press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us, as Paul says. We forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead, stretching out toward the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes this stretching and straining and pressing on will involve vigorous action in the present. It will wade into the realms of political ideas and practices. It will insist that there are better ways of arranging life on this planet that are in accordance with God's vision. It will labour to make this a reality.

Other times, it will simply look ahead in hope, not in an escapist way, but in a way that acknowledges that there is a limit to what we can accomplish, and that ultimately, we are limited creatures who cannot on our own bring about that culture of heaven that we most desire.

Perhaps it's because I've been talking with people like Vern Neufeld and Anneliese Claassen lately, people whose races seem almost run, but this "looking ahead" has been on my mind a lot.

We "eagerly await a Savior from there," Paul says. "The Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control" (Phil. 20-21).

As death approaches (and Paul probably imagined his death wasn't far off), it is natural to direct our gaze beyond what can be accomplished here and now.

And Paul only wants to gain Christ, to be united with Christ, to meet the One who had changed his life on that Damascus road and set it off into a previously unimaginable direction.

He goes so far as to say that everything to which he previously attached value, everything that defined and gave meaning to his life, everything in which his identity was located he now regarded as rubbish, in order that he may gain Christ!

These are strong words.

Paul is saying that his identity—past, present, and future—is now located with Jesus Christ and his purposes.

Don't keep looking back, Paul says. Don't base your identity on anything but the new thing that God has done in Christ. Keep stretching, straining, keep living into the future that God is preparing for those who love him.

The Christian hope to which we have been called is a big one. It cannot be reduced to political engagement, although this is a part of it.

It also cannot be reduced to sitting around longing for heaven, although sometimes this, too, is a part of it.

The Christian hope is nothing less than a vision of the transformation and renewal of all creation.

It is also a vision of a homecoming. And ultimately, an embrace of love. It is when we are truly seen, truly known, truly forgiven, truly set free. It is when the veil is removed, and faith becomes sight.

I've been around here long enough for you to know that your pastor occasionally draws inspiration from rock and roll. I think that our musicians and poets are often the prophets in our increasingly secular age.

I wrote this sermon with the new album from a band with a decidedly un-Mennonite name in my headphones. The Killers.

I'm not a fan of the name but I love their music. And this album in particular draws on themes from the lead singer Brandon Flowers' childhood, growing up in small town middle America.

The first song is called West Hills and tells the story of a drug addict reflecting back on his life from behind bars.

> And if there really is a judgement
> When He pulls my chart
> He'll reject my actions
> But He will know my heart
> And he'll prepare a place for me
> Where happiness instills
> And the light puts its loving hands on my head
> Free

A place where happiness instills. And the light puts its loving hands on my head. This is one of the better visions of the consummation of the culture of heaven that I've heard in a while.

The Christian hope runs through the cosmic to the political to the intimately personal. And this is good news.

It is the source of the deepest joy that we can imagine. God loves us. God loves the world. God has not abandoned either. God will come again to mend what has been broken, to make all things new.

In the meantime, let's be people, let's be a community of faith that is all about the culture of heaven, shall we?

By the grace of God, may it be so.

Amen.