

“Stand Firm in the Lord!”

Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt shared, “It was one of those moments that always stays with you.

I was 17 years old. It was early in the morning – I was on a field trip with a handful of other seniors from a high school history class. We were traveling west on Route 20 through northern Illinois just west of Rockford. I had a window seat in the third row of our rented van. The rising sun was behind us and was over the horizon just enough for me to see it emerging into that early morning: an old red barn with the words ‘To God be the Glory’ shingled in white on its otherwise green roof.”

Rev. Hunt continued “I have seen it many times since that first time, but I just happened to be driving that same highway again this last week and I remembered then the feeling that welled up inside me that early morning so long ago when that barn first came into view. For at that point, for me this journey of faith was particularly lonely as it can be for many young people – no doubt, this is even more true today.” Dr. Hunt explained, “There were not many places, at least not among my peers, where matters of faith were acceptable to talk about and honestly, I felt out of place much of the time as I sought to make sense of my place in the world in light of what I believed.” Hunt concluded, **“So that early morning it simply filled me up with joy and wonder to receive this visible sign of others who claimed the same ‘citizenship’ as I.”** (*“Our Citizenship in Heaven”* by Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt posted on [Dancing with the Word](#))

I hope everyone noticed that Paul mentioned the subject of citizenship in our Scripture Reading. The apostle did not refer to it as many politicians do today. Remember, the author of our Text wrote in **verse 20, “We, however, are citizens of Heaven, and we eagerly wait for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from Heaven.”** The Apostle to the Gentiles – the non-Jews wrote to tell us we are NOW citizens of Heaven – not just in some future time frame but now! So, what are the important implications from his assertion about our Heavenly citizenship?

One way of getting a good answer to that question is to consider something Perry L. Glanzer wrote in an article for the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Glanzer titled the article, “Raising Resident Aliens”. He shared, “My oldest son, in kindergarten at the time, casually informed me of this identity label at the dinner table one evening: ‘Caley calls me an alien.’ ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Because she says I’m weird,’ my son replied. Usually, it pains me to hear about my son being called names, but this time I decided to reinforce Caley’s point. ‘You know, Bennett, we are aliens.’ ‘Really?’ he asked.”

Glanzer explained, “This occasion produced merely one of the many conversations my wife and I hope to have with my son. We want him to understand that choosing to be a faithful disciple of Christ will identify him as one of the ‘aliens and exiles’ on this earth (1 Peter 2:11). Or to use the terminology of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, Christians are **‘resident aliens’.**”

Glanzer mused, “Of course, what it means to be a ‘resident alien’ can be subject to some misunderstanding, as we have learned in our family. When talking about the paperwork for renewing my wife’s resident alien card, our youngest son exclaimed, ‘Mommy, you can’t be an alien. If you’re an alien you have to be from outer space.’” Glanzer responded, “I chimed in that during my first Christmas in Canada (my wife’s country of citizenship), it actually felt as cold as outer space (minus twenty-five degrees Celsius for five straight days to be exact), but I do not think that my son or wife thought that comment was helpful. My wife then patiently explained that being a resident alien means you are a citizen of another country.”

Glanzer summed up, “The Apostle Paul reminds Christians ‘our citizenship is in heaven’ (Philippians 3:20).” **“Thus, good Christian education, at the very least, involves helping kids understand as well as practice what it means to be resident aliens.”** Glanzer concluded, “As with most Christian parents, we are not always sure what it means to raise resident aliens. Nonetheless, we have gained some insight into the process from the presence of a literal resident alien and two dual citizens in the family.” (“Raising Resident Aliens” article by Perry L. Glanzer for the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University)

The meaning of our being citizens of Heaven makes us resident aliens in this world. The Scripture author raised up guidance for us about how we are to be different – resident aliens in this world when he wrote in **verse 17, “Keep on imitating me, my friends. Pay attention to those who follow the right example that we have set for you.”** Unfortunately, like current day politicians, the Apostle Paul often tooted his own horn, so to speak. Let me suggest, it would have been better for him to point to Jesus’ example. However, Paul actually was at a disadvantage from us on the topic of the things Jesus did because he was not a follower of our Lord and Savior during Jesus’ Public Ministry. Clearly, the apostle had been told about some of Jesus’ teachings and actions but he never met God’s Son until his conversion on the road to Damascus – when the Crucified and Risen Jesus appeared to him in the blinding light of a vision. Paul wrote his letters prior to when most Biblical scholars believe the New Testament Gospels were written. However, he did know Luke and John, the youngest of Jesus’ original disciples, and I find some significant evidence of his knowledge of some of their gospels’ reports. Nevertheless, you and I have all four of the New Testament Gospels available to us, so we have the advantage over Paul in comprehending the full expression of Jesus’ Public Ministry. So, let’s modify the apostle’s urgings to be that we should **follow Jesus’ example and of those, who were faithful in their own following of our Savior.**

Unfortunately again, the Apostle Paul also had a tendency to be judgmental toward professing Christians, who did not live up to his understanding of God’s demands on people’s lives. He wrote in **verse 18, “I have told you this many times before, and now I repeat it with tears: there are many whose lives make them enemies of Christ’s death on the cross.”** Indeed, it is true that a significant portion of Christians are tempted to live their lives in ways, which go against Jesus’ example of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Agape Love. Yet, it would be very helpful for us to recall Paul also wrote we are already citizens of Heaven – the Kingdom of God. It seems the translators of the Good News Version – of our Pew Bibles forgot Paul was just about to declare us to be citizens of Heaven, so they interpreted his Greek words to come across like the message of John the Baptist. Please note within several sets of brackets following the stating of our Pew Bible’s translation on the screen I have provided a more literal translation of what Paul actual wrote in **verse 19, “They are going to end up in hell (Their end is destruction), because their god is their bodily desires (Their god is the belly). They are proud of what they should be ashamed of (They glory in their shame), and they think only of things that belong to this world (They think of earthly things).”**

Since we are citizens of Heaven – Resident Aliens, who are called to follow Jesus’ example, we are to die to the world’s way of selfish thinking and living – to put our trust in God’s Son, Jesus the Christ, as we live our daily lives following the New Life of Agape Love shown in our Savior’s Public Ministry! As the Apostle Paul closed our Scripture Reading in **Chapter 4, verse 1b, “this, dear friends, is how you should stand firm in your life in the Lord.”** Yes, you and I are to live as resident aliens for we are citizens of Heaven, who are waiting for the Return of Jesus Christ to usher in the Fulfilled Kingdom of God but we are not just waiting for we are following his agape love example, instead of the world’s ways of selfish thinking and living. **Stand Firm in the Lord! Amen.**