

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Looking for Heaven, while Standing on Earth”

Luke 12:13 – 21
Colossians 3:1 – 11

July 24, 2016

If you're a New York Knicks fan, or a Brooklyn Nets fan, or just someone who enjoys watching NBA basketball, you've probably heard of Tony Parker. For those of you who haven't heard of him, Tony Parker is a professional basketball player, who, since 2001, has played guard for the San Antonio Spurs. Parker has played on four NBA championship teams, he's a six-time all-star, and he was once an NBA finals Most Valuable Player. He's much-beloved by his fans; he's had an absolutely stellar career; and by any set of criteria, he's surely one of the best players of our era.

Tony Parker is so respected in San Antonio, and so thoroughly associated with that city, that many fans were probably surprised when, at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, Parker suited up for... the French National Team! How could this be? One of the greatest players in the American NBA... playing for France? Well, the reason why Tony Parker was playing for France in the 2012 Olympics is because... he's French! Parker was born in Belgium, but raised in France... and he is, in fact, a French citizen. So, it makes sense that he plays for his home country in major international competitions like the Olympics.

Now, as it turns out, Parker is also an American citizen, holding dual citizenship in France and the USA... in fact, he's also a citizen of Belgium and the Netherlands, too; but the point is that, when it comes to his basketball career, he has his feet planted firmly in both the United States, and France. And, of course, Tony Parker's not the only athlete or celebrity to do this; dual citizenship is far more common than many of us might realize. And the list of athletes who play professionally in one country, and internationally for another, is actually quite long.

Now, I share this example of dual-citizenship in order to assist us in our thinking about Paul's message to the Colossian church, which we read together this morning. Because, in a very important way, Paul, too, is talking about the phenomenon of dual-citizenship. It's interesting to note that Paul himself was something of a dual-citizen. He was born in Tarsus, which is located in modern day south-central Turkey; but he was sent to Jerusalem when he was very young, in order to continue his education under the leading rabbis of Judaism. So early in life, Paul had one foot in Asia Minor, and the other foot Judean Palestine. In addition to this, we learn in the Book of Acts that Paul was also, by birth, a citizen of the Roman Empire... a fact which later, after his conversion to Christianity, made it possible for him to present the message of the gospel in the city of Rome itself. So, Paul was very much a citizen of Asia, and of Palestine, and of Rome.

But, in writing to his friends in Colossae, Paul's not talking about being a citizen of Rome and Tarsus; his interest isn't a shared citizenship between Palestine and Asia Minor; and he didn't have in mind a Tony Parker combo conjoining France and the USA. No, what Paul was talking about was a dual citizenship between heaven, God's kingdom; and this world... the life that we lead right now. He was talking about having one foot planted firmly in this life and in this world; while keeping an attentive eye focused on the things of the life to come.

According to Paul, the Colossians, obviously, lived and breathed and went about their business very much in *this* world. The world of living and dying, and buying and selling, and growing up and growing old, and doing good and doing evil. Like us, the Colossians raised families, the Colossians got sick, the Colossians had to deal with unfriendly neighbors, and the Colossians had jobs to do. All of which is to simply state the obvious fact that, like you and me, the Colossian Christians were card-carrying citizens of planet earth!

But, also according to Paul, that's *not* all the Colossians were! The Colossians were citizens of planet earth, yes... but, as Paul went on to remind them, they were also citizens of *heaven*. Or, to put it more specifically, they were in the *process* of becoming citizens of heaven. And, by "heaven," Paul doesn't mean some vaporous, disembodied, ghost-like, spiritual existence... in which the Colossians would just flit and fly around the clouds, as God looked grinningly on. No, by "heaven," Paul is talking about the *kingdom* of heaven; the kingdom of *God*; that time and place in which *God's kingly rule* holds complete sway. And, according to the Christian gospel, that state of affairs is what will prevail when we, like Jesus, are resurrected to the new creation... which Almighty God has promised to bring about. This is why Paul began our text by reminding the Colossians that:

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God."

Now, when Paul talks about the Colossians having been "raised with Christ," he's referring to baptism, baptism just as we did this morning; and the fact that, as they came through the waters of baptism, the Colossians had been "resurrected" in a spiritual way... as Jesus had been resurrected in an actual, physical way. So, Paul says that the Colossians have been "raised with Christ:" meaning, raised to new life, resurrection life, kingdom-of-heaven life... which begins now, partially, in this world; but which will be realized, completely, in the life to come.

This is the very same hope, the very same promise, and the very same truth to which we entrusted beautiful little Eily this morning, as we "raised" her through the baptismal waters. And since we, and Eily, and the Colossians have entered into this new life, which will be fully realized when we are resurrected as Jesus was... it's appropriate for us to start living by those "new life" values and convictions right now, today, as we live out our days in this very human, very earthbound, existence that we know so well.

What Paul was saying to the Colossians then, and what he's saying to us right now, is that, as Christian disciples, we, like Tony Parker, have a kind of "dual citizenship. We are citizens of planet earth; and we are citizens of the kingdom of heaven. And even though *earth* feels much more like "home" to us right now; our ultimate destiny isn't *this* earth, but the new earth to come... when our Heavenly Father finally and fully establishes His kingdom. And that being the case, Paul is saying "start living *now* as if you're already full-blown citizens of the life to come! Because that's your true identity from now on!" And so Paul goes on to encourage the Colossians to:

"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died (symbolically, figuratively, in baptism), and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Your new life, the life you will one day fully inhabit.) When Christ, who is your life, appears (when Jesus returns at the end of the age), then you also will appear with him in glory."

And Paul finishes up this section of the letter by reminding his Colossian friends that, although they have dual-citizenship in earth and in heaven, they should work to avoid the sins of earthly citizenship... in favor of the virtuous behavior of heavenly citizenship; because the sinful behaviors of planet earth, simply have no place in the new creation of God's kingdom. And so, in language quite reminiscent of his letter to the Galatians, Paul challenges his readers to avoid idolatry, anger, rage, sexual immorality, greed, malice, slander, and so forth. Those things might fly in this earthly kingdom; but they won't fly in God's kingdom. So why not get a head start on shedding them?

And one great way to do that, Paul says, is to keep their hearts, and their minds, and their focus on what Paul calls "things above," meaning heavenly things, godly things, the kinds of things of which God's kingdom consists: love, mercy, compassion, generosity, respect, humility, grace. According to Paul, to focus their attention on *those* kinds of things, is to put themselves on the same general wavelength as heaven. And to do *that* is to give their dual heavenly citizenship the kind of time and attention it deserves.

Which brings us back to this morning, and our own attempt to follow in the footsteps of Paul and the Colossians... and to set our own hearts and minds on those all-important "things above." On the one hand, we all know about the challenges, and the obligations, and the responsibilities which come with the territory of being a

citizen of planet earth. In that respect, you and I are no different from our Colossian forebears of twenty centuries ago. The times and the details have changed over the years; but the stress, and temptation, and distraction, and roadblocks to our faith have not. For all our twenty-first century intellectual enlightenment and electronic wizardry, we are just as prone as the Colossians were to tripping over the enticements of this life, and this world, and landing on our fannies in a big old mess of sin.

But on the other hand, here we are this morning; in church, in worship, seeking the grace, and the mercy, and the love, and the wisdom of God. And we're not here right now because we've got nothing else to do, or because we love the super-comfortable pews, or because we just had to be near our iconic clock-tower. No, we're here because we really do recognize, on some important level, that we have a dual-citizenship in a heavenly kingdom that is not of this earth. We walk *into* this sanctuary from the angst and worry and pressure of our earthly citizenship; and in just a few minutes, we'll walk *out* and right back into it. But for now, we have our hearts and minds trained on "things above," more or less. And we are remembering the heavenly citizenship, the "kingdom-of-God" citizenship... which is our final and ultimate destiny.

And I think the message for us this morning, as we think about how to make Paul's words to the Colossians, Paul's words to *us*... is that we should try, as best we can, to carry a little bit of what we find *here* this morning, into the life we live out there all the rest of the week. And I'm not talking about walking around monk-like, or acting holier-than-thou, or trying to be so spiritual that we're no earthly good; no, I'm just talking about trying to let our heavenly citizenship shine through and into our earthly citizenship a little more often, and with a little more conviction.

What would it be like, if you and I were to really "look for heaven," even while we're standing on earth? And I'm not saying that we're not already trying to do that... we are, certainly. But what would it look like, if we put just a little more intentionality behind that effort? I'm sure the details would be different for each of us; but, in general, maybe we'd be a bit more forgiving of the people who've wronged us. Maybe we'd be a little more generous with what God has given us. Maybe we'd be more patient with the people who annoy us. Maybe we'd have a little more grace and love for people who aren't like us. Maybe we'd have a clearer and more settled sense of how much God really loves *us*.

As I said, each of us would fill out that description in different ways; but the important thing is that, however it might look for any one of us... it would remind us, loudly and clearly, that we really are citizens of heaven, even as we're citizens of earth. And to have that conviction and understanding, is a big part of what being a Christian disciple is all about.

As we make our way into the summer week ahead, let's do our best to do so as dual citizens of heaven and earth; as subjects of worldly conditions... but also as subjects of our Heavenly Father. And our Father will be with us... every step of the way! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!