

What's In a Name: Church

Philippians 3:17-4:9

Farmville Baptist Church

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Names are important. Names are what help us connect with the world around us. As children, we learn the most basic names for things: ball, dog, chair, car, mama, daddy. Growing older, we start to understand and even attach significance to particular names: names may strike us as powerful, gentle, funny, or odd. When we meet someone new, we share our name and try to remember theirs. When families join together in marriage, there is often a combining of tribes by a merging of a name. Sometimes, new names are given to us, nicknames that speak to some aspect of our personality or some important event in our past. Names are tied very closely to identity, and so knowing and

understanding someone's name is essential in the larger effort to know and understand *them*.

Like people, churches have names. Some tell you about the church's history, or maybe where the church is located. Some churches put a value or a principle in their name, while some churches pay tribute to an important or generous member of the past. Whatever is included has a purpose, or at least it did when a congregation chose that name.

Our church has a name, too. We are Farmville Baptist Church. Each of those words has a meaning, a reason for its inclusion. And over the next three weeks, we're going to sit with what those words communicate about our congregation.

Now, we could go straight through the name, starting with Farmville, but I do think it's important to start with the most important word first. And while we all love Farmville, and while we have a historic Baptist connection that is vital

to who we are, at our core, we are a church. That is the most important word on our sign out front, and it's the most important piece of the name that we have chosen to use to identify us, not just to one another, but to the world.

The word “church” is one of the earliest terms used to describe the community of faith formed by disciples of Jesus, and it gains authority as the proper catch-all for such communities because of Jesus’s response to Peter in our first passage this morning.¹ But the word itself is a little generic; in the Greek, it is *ekklesia*, and that word simply means “assembly” or “association.” There were all sorts of associations in your average Roman or Greek city: civic associations, religious associations, professional associations, sports associations, neighborhood associations. These were groups of people, loosely gathered around some

¹ Matthew 16:13-20

common concern or interest, sometimes vital and serious, other times fairly trivial. A Greco-Roman *ekklesia* was about as generic a word for a gathering of people as possible.

So, given the common usage of the word, *ekklesia*, for all sorts of groups or gatherings, religious and non-religious, Jewish and Greek, what's so special about the Christian *ekklesia*? As little groups of Jesus people began gathering together in neighborhoods and households, what distinguished them from all the other *ekklesias*?

We catch a glimpse in the letter of Paul to the church in Philippi. Philippi, we may recall, was a Roman colony. Theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon define a colony as “a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another, a place where the values of home are reiterated and passed on to the young, a place where the distinctive language and life-style of the resident aliens are

lovingly nurtured and reinforced.”² Philippi was such a colony – a small piece of Rome deep in what your average Roman would consider the barbarian wilderness. And in that colony, a different set of rules applied and a different sort of people could be found than existed all around. Here, Roman citizens lived and Roman law ruled. Both of these were vital pieces of what the colony was all about. Roman law created a known system of order, a particular way of life, that allowed for stability and predictability within the community. Making up that community were people – mostly former soldiers – who knew and cherished Rome’s values and who identified, not as Macedonians or even as Philippians, but as Romans.

It was among these people, and in this town, that Paul and Silas started the first church in Europe. And so maybe it

² Resident Aliens, 12.

shouldn't surprise us that later, when Paul writes to encourage that church, he uses a metaphor they would know well: he uses the language of colony.

The church, Paul says in Philippians, is a colony, too. Not a colony of Rome – far from it; they are a colony of heaven. And because the church is a colony of heaven, those who are part of that colony should understand their identity a little differently than everyone else and act a little differently than everyone else. Followers of Jesus, members of the colony, are citizens of heaven, of God's kingdom, not citizens of earth, or at least not earth as it is now. And followers of Jesus, members of the colony, are to live as citizens of heaven, not as citizens of earth. We act differently – a matter of behavior – because we are different – a matter of identity.

Let's break that down a little bit, as Paul does here.

First, citizenship. When did you learn about citizenship?

I learned a bit about citizenship all through school. I remember learning about the fifty nifty United States from thirteen original colonies in grade school – we had a song and everything. I remember learning about our three branches of government, checks and balances, and all of that in high school. I remember going with my mom on election day and learning about our duty to be informed and engaged about our national and local civic life. And I learned how a bill becomes a law thanks to *Schoolhouse Rock* – which my son just discovered last week. So, all along through my education, both in school and outside of school, I learned about citizenship.

Or, I should say, I learned about American citizenship.

Being a citizen of heaven – well, I had to learn that somewhere else, because being a citizen of God's kingdom

looks quite a bit different than being a citizen of America, or any other nation, for that matter. But being a citizen of any place or realm, earthly or heavenly, is a call to be involved, engaged, and active. It involves participating in the life of the community, taking responsibility for the wellbeing of the community, and contributing to the work and goals of the community. A citizen is very different than a consumer; a consumer takes and takes, while a citizen, given the blessings of the community, responds with giving back and participating in the work of the community. Being a consumer is living a self-focused and low-expectation life; being a citizen is both more selfless and more demanding.

Paul, writing to some of the privileged few in the ancient world who had this sense of “citizen” as a kind of person who both received privileges and bore responsibilities, chose this language to describe the identity of the people of God: our

citizenship is in heaven, he writes in Philippians 3:20. For followers of Christ, our ultimate allegiance isn't to tribe or country; it's to the kingdom of God. And so our priorities, our values, and our sense of responsibility are quite different than what is expected from citizens of any earthly nation. Our way of life is different. We are citizens of another place – and we live here, together, in a colony of heaven, the church. That is our identity. That is who we are.

What do such citizens do, though? What does that look like in practice, to live as citizens of heaven? What is life like in the colony of heaven known as the church?

Paul addresses that in our passage today, too, because for him life in the colony isn't just about identity – citizenship – it's also about behavior – how we actually live. In his description to the Philippian church of the citizen way of life, Paul begins by grounding his expectations in

something concrete: “Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.”³ As a good teacher, and as a spiritual father to many in the Philippian church, Paul understood the importance of having role models.

Much of the way we learn how to live comes from watching someone else and imitating what they do and how they live.

This is how my children, and probably yours, learned the basics of life: that this is a nose, and these are ears, and this is hair. Do you remember your child sitting on your lap and mirroring your moves as you touched each part of your face and said the name of that part? But, of course, learning from role models lasts much longer than toddlerhood and affects far more consequential things than whether they know what these things on the side of our heads that hear noises are

³ Philippians 3:17

called. Imitation is how we learn how to deal with anger, what to value in life, how to show love in healthy ways, and when it is appropriate to laugh, among many other facets of life.

Such imitation is also central to the story of what Jesus was all about. When he arrived on the stage of human history, he didn't try to seize power by the sword to impose his will or pack out lecture halls to spread his philosophy far and wide. Instead, Jesus invited a group of people to *follow him*. That was an invitation, in the Jewish world, to become a *disciple*. Disciples were students, but not students in the modern sense. We might think of them more as *apprentices*: they learned by being with their teacher constantly, observing everything they did, and then replicating that experiential knowledge in their own life and behavior. Such copycat living is at the core of Christianity, and we shouldn't

be surprised Paul suggests it as a model to the Philippian church here; it's a foundational way of learning in the colony of heaven. As he told the church in Corinth, "Imitate me, then, just as I imitate Christ."⁴

Then he gives some examples of what that sort of imitation looks like in the last nine verses of our passage today. He speaks about the situation that has developed between Euodia and Syntyche, two women who were leaders in the Philippian church but who had a falling out. He urges them to be of the same mind in the Lord. That doesn't mean they must agree – but it does mean that life in the colony prioritizes bonds that cannot be broken by disagreement. Both of these women are part of the family of faith in Philippi, both are citizens of the colony, and they need to be

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:1, GNT

able to live together as citizens instead of letting their differences divide them.

Then Paul enters into an almost-laundry-list of values and behaviors that embody the life of the people of God when they are living as citizens of heaven: rejoicing, gentleness, peace, prayer, thanksgiving. These words can kind of melt together in our minds into a mush of niceness – but we can't afford to let those practices lose their power. Living as people of joy, living as gentle people, living as non-anxious presences, building a life of prayer and thanksgiving – these are odd in this world, different. And so is his final word in this passage: to focus on, give attention to, the things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

All of these values – from the call to unity that allows for difference, to the behaviors Paul expects of citizens of heaven

in this earthly colony, to the practices he calls us to develop – all of these should strike us today as counter-cultural. After all, we look around us, and we see voices from every side highlighting and exploiting our differences instead of encouraging us to find common ground. We are told gentleness is weak, peace is elusive, and anxiety is what we should expect because there is so little in this world to make us rejoice. The voices that are loudest are the ones trying to draw our eyes and ears and attention to things that are far from noble or praiseworthy, and truth and right are drowned out by shouts to embrace alternative facts and what feels true to us based on our own biases and preferences. Paul’s description of how to live the life of the colony of heaven here on earth is at odds with all of that.

And it should. We are a colony, which Hauerwas and Willimon articulate as “an island of one culture in the middle

of another. In baptism our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another, and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens.”⁵

At first glance, such a realization might be troubling for us. We are citizens of the world’s strongest superpower, and our culture influences the world. Why would we want to be resident aliens, with all of the difficulties that come with being a stranger in a strange land? It probably troubled the Philippian Christians, too, who were citizens of the most powerful and influential nation of their day. Just like them, we have come to enjoy the perks of such earthly citizenship; indeed, if you’re like me, the citizenship of earthly life in general, and of America in particular, is much more natural, and easier to boot. It’s a consumer citizenship, where we

⁵ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12.

receive and receive and are asked to give up little. It is an easier path.

But when we come to see our citizenship in heaven, and our life in the body of Christ as living as a colony of heaven, we can find a new joy and satisfaction that comes from taking part in something both bigger and better than life as we know it. We find a way of life, as Paul says, that gives us the peace of God – one marked by joy, by freedom from anxiety, and by things to be thankful about. We also find that we have a part to play in furthering the aims of our colony and expanding the kingdom. Over and over, the Scriptures tell us that God is interested in involving us in his work – from the invitation to Adam to name the animals and care for the Garden, to the reminder to Israel that they were to be a light to the nations, drawing people to the joy of God’s kingdom, to the ways Jesus sent his disciples out to do the

same sort of life-giving work he was doing, like healing the sick and opening the eyes of the blind.

Colonies of people like that, true citizens who identify first with the kingdom of heaven and live according to the values of that kingdom, can change communities and even the world. And for 2000 years, the church has been doing this in so many different ways. It has constantly had to shift and change the methods, but the mission has remained the same: to be a colony of heaven. We see that on display in the early Christian house churches, the ancient monasteries of the East, the Catholic parishes of Europe, and the Celtic monastic communities that lived among and served the villages of a pagan Ireland. And we see it today, in a culture where, as the traditional church is waning in influence, followers of Jesus are starting new churches and established churches are starting fresh approaches to evangelism,

mission, discipleship, and fellowship – approaches that we never would have imagined even one generation ago. We don't throw in the towel or capitulate to the world around us. We adapt, we innovate, we experiment, we keep going – because that's how we live in the colony of heaven.

Across 2 millennia and around the globe, the Holy Spirit has been breathing new life into millions of these colonies, or outposts, of heaven known as church. It still does so, today. And that's why the word "church" is still the most important part of our name: because that word tells the world, and reminds us, of who we are supposed to be. We are a colony of heaven, an outpost of another way of life, citizens of God's kingdom, here and now. Do we embrace our citizenship as resident aliens of heaven here on earth? Do we live as those who abide by the way of Jesus? Are we the colony God calls

us to be, in this time and place? Let us always be reminding ourselves what's in our name – the name of church.