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Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
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Hebrews 11:8-16, Matthew 5:43-48  
"Citizen and Christian"

As most of you know I became a citizen of this country last year. They say that new citizens are often more fired up about their citizenship than citizens by birth and blood. My US citizenship certainly is fresh and exciting for me although I have lived in this country for 30 years.

I remember the thrill and tremendous meaning the day I became a citizen. It was at the Paramount Theater in Oakland. Over a thousand people from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe took the oath that day. I felt and saw the new spirit coming into this country in the great variety of people gathered there that day.

This is a nation forged through immigration and is still formed by immigration. Last year nearly 620,000 immigrants went through the naturalization process in the US. I was among them and thus the latest in the long line of people from all over the world woven into the fabric of this country.

Before I became a US citizen I regarded myself as a citizen of the world. I still do and not only because I have dual citizenship. For sure, I straddle two continents – America and Africa – in a physical, intellectual and emotional sense but I regard most essentially the world as my home.

None of this detracts from the fact that I am now a US citizen and happily and proudly so. I regard myself as a patriot of this country and appreciate and admire its democratic values.

Many people who come to this country do so because they are fleeing non-democratic, authoritarian, gender and religion-inhibiting countries. The fortunate thing about my citizenship of this country is that it is not that different from where I came from.

South Africa is a market-based, capitalist, democratic country. It values religion and the separation of religion and state. We lived under the segregated apartheid regime and struggled against it as this country fought against racial discrimination. Segregation was far more pronounced in South Africa. Democracy was more restricted, especially for blacks. The press was restricted. Today, South Africa is free in all respects although they are still dealing with the legacy of apartheid, such as poverty, exacerbated by new expressions of greed.

The similarities between South Africa and the US are amazing. Therefore, it has never been difficult for me to adapt to this country. I have been a permanent resident for three decades and have had all the rights except the vote. I paid my taxes.

I have stated in a nutshell my identity as a US citizen. Those of us here if citizens of this country are so identified. Yours is longer and therefore deeper than mine.

No matter where we are on the spectrum we claim and value this identity and we do so in the context of our faith. Thus, the sermon: Citizen and Christian.

Most of you were born in the US and thus automatically were citizens of this country. You became Christian along the way: citizen first and Christian second. I was a Christian before I became a citizen of this country. It really doesn't matter which comes first because one's faith is the lens through which everything is seen including one's citizenship.

Part of one's citizenship is to make sense of that citizenship and one does so through the Constitution and for Christians through our faith. Our faith helps us to be good citizens. One can take this in a thousand directions. I will lead it through the biblical passages today.

The passages are arbitrary. I subscribe to a free lectionary-based website called "The Text This Week." It provides worship resources for the lectionary texts. This week it provided additional texts for Independence Day: Hebrews 11:8-16 and Matthew 5:43-48.

The Hebrew passage focuses on Abraham's faithful journey from his original homeland in Mesopotamia to the land of Canaan. It speaks of his sojourn there and then the Hebrew people's sojourn in Egypt and return to the land of Israel.

The passage states: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents... He looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.... They were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland."

This sounds much like the original settlers of this country leaving Europe, many fleeing restrictions on their religion, and settling in this new world where there were new opportunities and where God could be architect and builder. In both cases the new settlers met with inhabitants of the land. Histories of both record cohabitation and subjugation.

One of the most meaningful exercises I've had in my 30 years of living in the US came at the opening of a seminar on religion here in Marin. We gathered to learn about the variety of religions in the US. The seminar leader asked for a time of respectful silence and thanksgiving for the original inhabitants of this land, our Native-American sisters and brothers. Like Canaan for Abraham this land was inherited from others.

For sure, history records that much of the land was unfairly taken but since we are here and settled the least this seminar leader could suggest was for us to be grateful, respectful and thankful to the original inhabitants. We can also express our gratitude by

supporting Native-American grievances and to think critically about casinos on Native-American land.

The Matthew passage proposes another perspective to view one's citizenship as a Christian. In the text Jesus states:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?"

How do we begin to approach this text as citizens of the USA and as Christians? The Webster's College Dictionary defines "enemy" as "a person who fosters harmful designs against another; a hostile opponent; an adversary."

There are many people we can hate. A member of our church was recently caught in an identity theft scam. The scammer caught her on the telephone when she was ill and vulnerable.

"Enemies" crash and hack computers and exploit children. We find them among our neighbors involved in corporate, white-collar and organized crime. My children spent two years in a school in Staten Island, New York, with children of a famous Mafia family. At school basketball games I wondered who among the parents were members of the Mafia.

We know the corporate offenses: insider trading, antitrust violations, fraud (usually involving consumers), damage to the environment, exploitation of labor in violation of labor and health and safety laws, and the failure to maintain a fiduciary responsibility towards stockholders, so long as stockholders and board of directors don't rule at the expense of fair labor practices.

Jesus says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." When Jesus says "love" he means love like God loves us and God loves everybody. God knows what everyone is capable of – good and bad – and God loves us anyway. So we ought to love our friends and enemies, the so-called good and the bad.

What's a good Christian citizen to do in the real world? We have the law and the Constitution. We love criminals and the society by bringing criminals to justice. We love them by supporting fair trials that democracy brings and once criminals are behind bars – if they land up there – we continue to love them by ensuring that justice is restorative and not retributive. Restorative justice involves such things as prayer, forgiveness, prevention education, healing of the person and the families, reconciliation, timely parole, and the like. For the record: It's hard to love someone who steals your life savings or pension.

People flee oppressive countries around the world to come to this free, democratic, gender and religion-accepting country. Let's keep it this way. Citizen and Christian: I know, I have only scratched the surface.

God bless America, God bless our faith and God bless the world. Amen.