

Lent 2C – Our Heavenly Passport

Philippians 3:17-4:1

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

This morning's homily is about this morning's reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Because his writing tends to be so dense – which I don't mean in its usual pejorative sense – I'm going to read again the lines I want to talk to you about.

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In May I'll be in Waltham, Massachusetts, for my 50th college reunion at Brandeis University. It was an extraordinary learning experience for me there because, although my father's family were mostly Jewish, he himself had not been raised as a member of that religion, and I had attended church school at Christ Church, Canaan, and then chapel services at Hotchkiss; so my own roots were small-town Protestant New England, whereas Brandeis was, though secular, primarily made up of big-city Jewish kids. I chose to attend college there not because it was Jewish in any way, but because it had a reputation of being intellectual and quirky – and co-ed!

One of the glories of the school was, and is, that there are three chapels grouped around a small lake, each in the shape of a Bible resting in various positions. I was president of the Protestant group, and, one year, I think it was probably '58 to '59, I conceived the idea that it would be really interesting to bring a variety of religious traditions to worship services in the chapel. So I went in search of appropriate representatives of a sampling of denominations. I didn't always get exactly what I was after, but it was always interesting. Once, for example, I went to Cambridge to what I thought was the Quaker Meeting House, and ended up with – not Quakers, but Mormons. Just a bit of difference, eh? But some of the Mormons did come and give us at least a taste of what an LDS service would look like.

One of the people I found in Cambridge and actually drove back to Brandeis with me, however, was someone who later became one of the most highly respected theologians of the era, and, as it turns out, for awhile a professor at Brandeis himself, and always a great friend of the school. His name was Krister Stendahl, professor then at the Harvard Divinity School, and later its dean, and for some time the Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm. As it turns out, he was also the favorite professor, while she was working on her Harvard PhD, of the woman who taught my course on preaching. Most importantly, however, Stendahl is remembered today as among the very first to rethink the traditional view of Paul – a view ironically stemming mainly

from the writings of Martin Luther himself, who asserted essentially that Paul was so wracked with feelings of his own guilt, for not being able to meet the stringent requirements of the Jewish religion – the law – that he wrote his letters primarily to convince all of us that faith, not works, is the key to our personal salvation.

Stendahl's efforts have blossomed into a large literature that has been labeled the "new perspective on Paul." The view of these theologians has been that Paul was writing his letters not to assuage our individual consciences – that's a much more modern concern – but, since his was primarily a Gentile audience, to assure them that they were as welcome to the Christian communities as his own Jewish people were. This view has not gone unchallenged, as you might imagine, by the many Protestants who have preached and taught for years about the importance of Christians giving themselves to Christ – to be born again – so as to be saved. In a way, this emphasis on personal salvation, it seems to me, is precisely what both the Gospels and Paul are really trying to preach against. Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians has been perfectly placed by those who are responsible for the design of our lectionary. Not only does it, by its imagery, invoke our traditional Lenten theme of a more ascetic way of life, but it also has language that gets to the heart of what I believe Lent is really all about. By its very nature, personal salvation is something that is a Christian, otherworldly, analogue to the process of gaining status and wealth in our world. It's something you have to strive for!

So let's look at that letter more closely. Whatever is it, going on in Philippi, that has Paul so exercised? Something Paul is always concerned about in his letters is the fact that people often are devoted to what he calls the flesh, by which he isn't talking about sex, but about everything that has to do with our desires as human beings, instead of the life that God calls us to, a life facilitated by God's grace. Here, apparently – I say apparently because what we know of the issues in the Christian community of Philippi is only what we're able to infer from this letter – anyway, here apparently there are some who understand the meaning of the cross in a way very different from what Paul has been trying to convey. Paul is, frankly, pretty harsh in his condemnation of them. They are, he says, "enemies of the cross of Christ." Paul tells us "their god is the belly."

And what exactly does Paul mean by this term – belly? What is he talking about? Well, apparently there have been some preachers visiting the Philippians urging these Gentiles to become Jews in order then to become Christians – that is, like the very first Christians, like the disciples themselves, all of whom were observant Jews, to become circumcised and eat only kosher food. So Paul chastises them with words like "their glory is in their shame, which is a euphemism in that society for what one commentator himself euphemistically calls "the male sex organ" – that which would have to be circumcised. The reference to the belly is a bit more ambiguous, since it may be taken as just what it says, that the people he is referring to are more concerned about adopting the eating customs of the preachers who have come through than accepting the good news that Christ has come for both Jews and Gentiles alike, and that, therefore, Gentiles need not become Jews. "Our citizenship is

in heaven,” Paul tells them. Not, by implication, in becoming members of a particular earthly tribe, whose center is in Jerusalem.

But there is another way of understanding Paul’s reference to the belly that conforms more closely to the theme that he articulates most clearly in another sentence in this passage: “Their minds are set on earthly things.” This is a sentiment that we hear not only from Paul, but from Jesus when he admonishes Peter on the road near Caesarea Philippi (when he refers to Peter as Satan for thinking in earthly terms), in several of his parables, and, by implication, as he washes the disciples’ feet, as depicted in John’s Gospel, reminding them that he came to serve, not to be served.

How does this broader meaning derive from the expression, “Their god is the belly”? Well, in the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures that first-century Jews used, the word used for belly often meant that hollow place in our body where stomach and heart both are to be found, not just the organ that digests food; so the term meant in those Scriptures, on occasion, is something more like that place within where people gather in and accumulate everything from the outside that builds their self-esteem, all that gives them a feeling of honor and worth. And when that is the process that drives their ambition, they are clearly setting their minds on earthly things, not on God’s world, where Paul says their true citizenship lies.

O.K., you say, what’s that got to do with us? We’ve never been tempted to observe the kosher laws let alone, if eligible of course, to run off to the doctor to be circumcised. To think more about what Paul is really trying to say, in light of this more general interpretation of the Greek word that has been translated “belly,” has to give us pause. What is it that the world has been saying to us about our own self-worth? What gives us the sense that we have contributed something of value with the time we have been given here on earth? Do we not usually look to the opinion that others have of us to judge that worth? Do not position or wealth or fame, or even infamy, if we judge from the actions and words of some of our most troubled young people – such as those at Columbine High School – don’t those attributes define success for most humans?

I once heard a radio interview with a critic who related a story about Bette Midler when she was just starting in show business. I don’t vouch for its truth, and I’m not suggesting that Ms Midler does not have enormous talent, but what this critic told us was that when she was starting out she was asked what she wanted to accomplish with her life, what her goal was. Her response, he said, was “to become famous.” That’s what defined for her a successful, fulfilling life.

In this letter, Paul wants us to hear that worldly success, however we define it, is simply not what God calls us to. After all, we’re here only temporarily – on a passport issued in heaven. May we all strive to live lives worthy of that citizenship.

AMEN