

Jimmy Abbott  
Philippians 3:17-4:1  
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Open my lips O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

First, a brief word of introduction. I am Jimmy Abbott, a seminarian from the Diocese of Texas. I am currently studying at the Virginia Theological Seminary, your rector's alma mater, and I'll be graduating this May. I stand here in this pulpit humbled by your rector's invitation to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to this church. Thank you.

One of the great blessings and privileges of the Virginia Seminary is the opportunity to travel to different places within the Anglican Communion. Two years ago, I embarked on a trip to the Dominican Republic in order to learn Spanish and foster relationships among Anglicans. It was a truly spectacular trip; I witnessed firsthand God's work among an impoverished and destitute people. I made friends with seminarians from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and even Haiti, and I picked up a lot of Spanish along the way. But what really grabbed my attention was Dominican culture, its people, its music, its love for baseball. Yet perhaps I only noticed the culture so much because it was so incredibly different. Take for example, the American love for personal space. We like to have this little bubble surrounding us. And who doesn't get a little miffed if somebody invades that sacred space? In the Dominican Republic, there is no such concept as this personal bubble. To be honest, it was really awkward.

One day in the Dominican Republic I was traveling with a Salvadoran friend of mine on a bus. Now, there was this young woman in front of us. And I'll put it this way, she wasn't just invading my personal space, she was taking it by storm, all the while speaking to me in supersonic Spanish. She wasn't just getting close, she was getting *way too* close. I was only too glad to get off the bus and ask my friend what that was all about. "Well, it's easy," he said,

“you’re an American and she wanted to marry you.” Feeling a bit of an ego boost I asked him what my country had to do with it. He put it bluntly, “because you are a green card, passage to America. You are her path to citizenship in the United States.”

Now it’s an odd thing to have a stranger ask you to marry her on a bus in a foreign country. But really, when all things are considered, it makes perfect sense. Comparatively speaking, we have it pretty good here in America. We have schools to educate our children, we have safe and clean hospitals, we have drinkable water that comes out of our faucets; all things that are just pipe dreams in the rest of the world. It was not me that this Dominican woman wanted, but what I represented. She desperately wanted to be one of us.

Now if you are thinking to yourself, “Oh no, is this guy going to preach a sermon on immigration?” you’re absolutely right. Immigration into the kingdom of heaven.

St. Paul writes to his Christian brothers and sisters in the church in Philippi: “But our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3:20a). The population of Philippi would have been Roman citizens, granting them all the rights and privileges of the empire. Like being an American citizen, with access to the benefits of our society, being a Roman citizen was a big step up the social ladder. But Paul turns this around, he wants the Christians in Philippi to think of themselves not as members of an earthly domain, but as citizens of the heavenly city.

The status of being a citizen of heaven comes with its own rights and privileges. Paul writes that citizens of heaven have a hope, they have faith, and they trust in the Savior Jesus Christ. Citizens of heaven sing with true voice the psalm we read this morning: “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom

shall I be afraid?" You see, it's good to be a citizen of heaven. The denizens of the heavenly realm are blessed with a passport, a green card, proof of immigration into that better place.

So my question is this: How is it that our churches aren't brimming with folks desperately trying to become citizens of heaven? I mean, we have so much to offer; hope, faith, trust in a loving God, a community of friends and believers. Think of that poor Dominican woman, she was doing all she could so that I would take her as my wife, and so that she could become a citizen of the United States. And this was just because I looked like an American. How many of us have had strangers clamoring for our attention just because we had a cross around our necks? Or, did anybody approach you on Ash Wednesday, when you had a cross of ashes on your forehead, asking you to take them, so that they could become citizens of heaven? Not many, I imagine.

Now, as today is Theological Education Sunday, I'm going to share with you a word that is a hot topic on the Virginia Seminary campus. The word is "evangelization." Not evangelism, but "evangelization." In one of my classes, the Theology of Mission, we have been discussing this concept in great depth. Evangelism, to most of us, at best simply means preaching the gospel, or spreading the good news. At worst, it's holding your Bible in the air, and using your tongue as a clanging cymbal or a noisy gong. But **evangelization** means much more. It's the idea of "total ministry." It's not just about teaching or preaching. Evangelization means building schools, running food pantries. It's about teaching the illiterate how to read and providing medicine to the sick. But what's more, evangelization is not just doing good works. Christians are called to this total ministry because they are citizens of heaven. As Christians, we have witnessed the overwhelming goodness and graciousness of God, and it's all we can do to turn around, and share this message with the rest of the world. We do this sort of work to spread

the good news of Jesus Christ, but to spread it by showing our love in action. The Church is called to do this work of evangelization simply because we are citizens of heaven.

But this comes with a word of warning. In this passage from Philippians, Paul describes what he calls the “enemies of the cross of Christ.” These are the people whose end is destruction, their god is the belly, and their glory is in their shame. What they do is look to themselves and to their own work and rejoice. This is what the Church becomes when it believes that its good works, outreach centers and missions are enough. We have to constantly remind ourselves that we work *because* we are Christians. We can never lose sight of the gospel. If we continue to run our soup kitchens simply because it’s a *good thing to do*, then why wake up early on Sunday morning? We are citizens of heaven, and it is precisely because of that fact, that we must go about this world doing the work of Jesus Christ.

But here’s the hard reality. We can open all the outreach centers in the world, we can preach the gospel at all times and in all places, but this doesn’t mean that everybody will want to become a citizen of heaven with us. Evangelization is not some talisman that will fill our pews. *People may clamor for our charity but not for our citizenship.* I couldn’t take that Dominican woman home with me, and not just because my fiancée wouldn’t like it, and not everybody who eats in a soup kitchen will become a Christian. And what’s more, just because we do the work of evangelization doesn’t mean we’re Christians. Doing good works is not a way to get your passport stamped with the visa for heavenly citizenship. Our immigration into the heavenly city cannot be earned, and is not rewarded for our good deeds. Citizens, our passport into the heavenly realm can only be stamped by the one “we are expecting, a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Evangelization is not the ends of the Christian life. Instead, it is only a means by which we invite others to become our fellow citizens.

A final word of exhortation: during this Lenten pilgrimage, take out that proof of citizenship. Be it passport, birth certificate or green card. Reflect on your immigration, your pilgrimage and your privileged status as a citizen of heaven. But most of all, pay attention. There is someone invading your personal space, someone that wants to discuss your citizenship with you. His name is Jesus, the Christ.