

Citizenship 101 (Identity) –Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
 Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV Baptism of the Lord (January 13) 2013

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,* ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with* the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved;*' with you I am well pleased."

It was in July 1986. I was leading my first Conference short term Mission Trip to Mexico. It was during a few minutes that I had alone time – I was taking a run – when I was confronted by some Mexican locals. At first it frightened me. I got over that quickly, and began to ponder what it meant. I was running, in my American style good running shoes, wearing my American style running shorts and shirt. They came out and jogged beside me – not for very long – and asked me: ***Hey Buddy! how can we become an American like you.***

I pondered what it was that they were wanting. Whatever it was, it was clear from their tone of voice that they were envious of me, and wished they could have what I possess, in being an American.

Although it has been over a quarter century later, as I pondered that question again: WHAT WAS IT THAT I HAD THAT THEY WANTED, I came across a Lew Harris poll of Americans in which they described what being an American means to them.

It was not a multiple choice survey. Rather, each person was asked to answer an open ended question of what being an American meant to them. Their short answers were recorded and analyzed, for what key concepts were verbalized. The results are in your bulletin [that tear off sheet on the

back of the weekly calendar.] Let me fill in the blanks for you (It's Sermon Note #2 – I sometimes change the order of the sermon after I write those notes earlier in the week:)

1. Being an American (according to a Harris Poll) means

- 59 % freedom
- 23 % patriotism
- 16 % democracy
- 12 % pride
- 10 % lifestyle
- 9 % civil rights
- 9 % attitude
- 4 % community service

How does that fit with what you would say “being an American” means to you?

If I had stopped and helped those young Mexican men to become American citizenship – which I did not, although I was tempted to do so in later work team experiences – and if they were successful, the day would come where they would pass the test and have to take an oath of allegiance as citizens of the United States.

There's been some sort of Oath of Allegiance for Citizenship around since the days of the American Revolution. The present one, just quoted, can actually be changed by the Department of Immigration and Naturalization at any time -- under the terms of the federal Administrative Procedures Act -- so long as it complies with the terms of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1953, and maintains five basic principles, namely:

- a. allegiance to the [United States Constitution](#),
- b. renunciation of allegiance to any foreign country to which the immigrant has had previous allegiances
- c. defense of the Constitution against enemies "foreign and domestic"

- d. promise to serve in the [United States Armed Forces](#) when required by law (either combat or non-combat)
- e. promise to perform civilian duties of "national importance" when required by law

As good as being an American citizen is, do you know which citizenship entitles you to have all your obligations and taxes paid -- all you have to do is ask and receive? **Look in your Hymnal at page 30, ¶4, Question 2]** It's with Citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Know that the Kingdom of God is the primary topic of Jesus' preaching, teaching, and role modeling instruction. I invite you to do the Gospel Math: [times the following are mentioned in the Gospel, in one form of word or other]

$$\begin{array}{r}
 72 \text{ (Love)} \\
 + 61 \text{ (Prayer)} \\
 + 41 \text{ (Money)} \\
 = 142 \text{ (Kingdom of God / Heaven)}
 \end{array}$$

Jesus was about the Kingdom of Heaven MORE THAN ANY OTHER THING.

Do you remember how He taught His disciples to pray, when they asked: **Thy Kingdom come; Thy Will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.**

And He was **NOT** merely trying to teach us how to **punch our train ticket to someplace after we pass through that doorway we call Death.**

No, He said: **The Kingdom of Heaven is AT HAND.**

Jesus was all about getting people to claim their citizenship in this radical Kingdom. We will take a break next Sunday, when we consecrate our servant leaders for 2013, and the sermon will deal with our spiritual

gifts. Then we will return, for the next three Sundays, to Citizenship 102, 103, and 104.

According to the Lew Harris poll, being an American citizen means ... you saw the results above.

Let me ask you now to write down on your bulletin just a short answer to a similar question: **WHAT DOES BEING A CITIZEN OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD MEAN TO YOU?**

I'll wait.

[Share this with your neighbor.]

A few Sundays back, I observed: **Some parents say that they want to wait until their children are old enough to decide for themselves, so they won't baptize them now.** And then I asked the question: **How old do those same people think their children should be before they pick their citizenship?**

Baptism is our taking on the citizenship of the Kingdom of God, because it satisfies the very first characteristic and qualification of citizenship in the Kingdom of God – that is YOUR IDENTITY.

John the Baptist was preaching and working down at the Jordan River, doing what Baptism meant to Jewish folks back at that time: You went under the water to get your sins washed away. Some people had to do it fairly often.

What sins did Jesus need to have washed away?

If you answered: NONE, then you are coming right along.

In fact, in Matthew's Gospel account, John says to Jesus that Jesus should be baptizing him, not him baptizing Jesus. But Jesus told John to go ahead and do it, **in order to fulfill all righteousness.** (Matthew 3:14-15)

Then we read what happened when Jesus came up out of the waters.

Jesus, the sinless one, was baptized and immediately afterwards received the mark of citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven: the MARK OF IDENTITY: **"beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold."**

In Sermon Note number 7, I ask you the question: **Are citizens of the Kingdom of God**

**— admirers,
— followers, or
— disciples of Jesus?**

That's a good question. And we will be looking at unpacking what that means over the next few weeks. **But for now**, you need to know that the **very first part of citizenship is claiming your identity.**

You ARE a **BELOVED CHILD OF GOD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD.** Your **IDENTITY** is also **YOUR VALUE ... YOUR WORTH.** And nothing can change that. You don't earn it. Baptism is the work of God. All we do is accept.

What would it mean to you if you were out one day and someone came up to you and said: **Hey Buddy! how can we become a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, like you?**

If you, or your children, is not baptized and would like to be, please contact me. Today, we will **REMEMBER OUR IDENTITY – GOD'S CLAIM AND MARK ON US – AND BE THANKFUL.**