

“Come to Me, All You That Are Weary!”
A Sermon by Rev. Ruth Ragovin
For Independence Day Weekend, July 5, 2020
First Christian Church, Murray, KY

Matthew 11:28-30 ~ [Jesus said]: ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

“The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus (1886)



The Statue of Liberty, 1900. Courtesy the Museum of the City of New York.

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

This weekend, with its displays of fireworks and social gatherings, our country is celebrating “Independence Day,” remembering that on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress declared the independence of its thirteen colonies from Britain. It is indeed an important day to celebrate the creation of our country as we reflect on the unique experiment it embarked upon and also consider whether God is pleased by our individual attempts to create a better nation. I admit that I’m probably not the best person to do this because, while I was born not all that far from here in Belleville, Illinois, and then spent the first ten years of my life primarily in Boston, we immigrated to Canada and then went off to Germany so those critical middle and high school years when one absorbs American history and culture were not to be. I rather learned about things Canadian and German, reading authors like the Canadian Margaret Atwood (author of *The Handmaid’s Tale*), the German author Hermann Hesse, and enjoyed listening to the music of the Canadian Leonard Cohen and became a huge life-long fan of the German composer Johann Friedrich Bach.

Yet, during those years, I frequently had stopovers at various US airports between Germany and Canada and visited with relatives on the other side of the border in Ohio and St. Louis. Now I know I may be generalizing, but what really stood out to me about Americans then (and when I encountered them overseas)—in addition to them being somewhat pleasantly plumper than Canadians or Germans—was how friendly they seemed and how much they smiled (especially if I was coming from Germany where, at least in my neighborhood, everyone always seemed to have a permanent scowl on their face and was in a hurry)! There was this kind of visceral shift in energy and atmosphere the moment I was back in the United States: from reserve to warmth, from formality to informality. It was such a relief not to worry about whether I should address someone with the formal “Sie” or the informal “Du” but could just refer to others as “you” or “y’all,” often using their first names. And then there was just this incredibly wonderful diversity of people one encountered in the USA that I loved.

Now truth be told, when I came back to the United States as a young adult for my graduate studies, I always thought I would return to Canada, but then there was the intervention (possibly divine!) of this handsome and very sweet guy named Russ, who just happened to hate cold weather. Yes, it can get pretty cold up in Canada! I’m sure you know how the story turned out. With the exception of about two years in Berlin, Germany (both East and West), I’ve been in the United States ever since and have come to appreciate this country as I have lived in New York, various towns in New Jersey, the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, San Diego, California, twice in rural Tennessee, and now in

Kentucky, where we hope to retire as long as the church will put up with me for a few more years. Over time, I have continued to marvel at the many idiosyncrasies of America and always chuckle at this statement that for years has been circling on social media:

Only in America...can a pizza get to your house faster than an ambulance...

Only in America...do people order double cheese burgers, a large fry, and a diet coke...

Only in America...do banks leave both doors open and then chain the pens to the counters...

Only in America...do we buy hot dogs in packages of ten and buns in packages of eight...

Only in America...do we use the word “politics” to describe the process so well: “Poli” in latin meaning “many” and “tics” meaning “blood-sucking creatures”... (<http://jokes2go.com/jokes/7774.html>)

Ouch! I know we are having a really tough time in America right now. We are all sick and tired of the partisan divide that is becoming even more vehement during this unprecedented time of a health, economic, and racial crisis. Yes, it often feels like there are “blood-sucking creatures” out there to get us. The ongoing racial unrest leads us, over this Independence Day weekend, to think about our relationship to the various symbols related to our American heritage through monuments, statues, flags, and the names of places. Our own community is engaged in a heartfelt, respectful, and important debate about the Robert E. Lee statue on our court square.

As a person who attempts to follow the teachings and spirit of Jesus, I’ve thought about the ways I would like our country to be symbolized through external objects. I find myself drawn, above all, to the Statue of Liberty that stands proudly in the harbor of New York City, where it has welcomed millions of immigrants to America on their way to be processed at nearby Ellis Island. We remember that the Statue of Liberty was given as a gift from the French to the United States to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and also as a symbol of the friendship between the two countries. The statue was placed in the Upper New York Bay on the small Liberty Island and dedicated by President Grover Cleveland on October 28, 1886. The Sephardic Jewish poet Emma Lazarus accepted the assignment of penning a poem to be placed on the pedestal, which she called “The New Colossus.” It goes like this:

The New Colossus, by Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
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Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
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Unfortunately, when the Statue of Liberty was dedicated in October of 1886, Emma Lazarus was ill and could not attend, dying a year later when she was only 38 years old. I wish she could have lived longer to see how her oft-quoted words began to represent the radical hospitality our nation stands for, as her poem was mounted on the pedestal of Statue of Liberty, which is perhaps the world’s most recognizable external symbol of freedom and democracy.

This Independence Day Sunday her words—“*Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore ... the homeless, tempest-tost to me*”—so remind me of Jesus’ words as recorded in Matthew 11:28-30: ²⁸ “*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*” ²⁹ “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*” ³⁰ “*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*”

We European Americans might like to imagine that we come from the aristocracy of Europe and many get on Ancestry.com to see if they can trace their origins back to royalty. While a few Americans may boast of a high pedigree, most of us are the humble descendants of those “huddled masses yearning to be free” that Emma Lazarus wrote about or those Jesus referred to who were “weary and carrying heavy burdens” and in need of “rest.”

With the exception of our Native American friends, we are a nation of immigrants. We trace our ancestry back to many kinds of people from many different lands. At our Wednesday Night 'Virtual' Live Zoom gathering this past Wednesday, our wonderful group reflected on Emma Lazarus' poem as we shared about how our own ancestors came to the United States of America, some of whom sailed past the Statue of Liberty on their way to be processed and welcomed into this country on Ellis Island.

- Elena shared how she had immigrated here from Uruguay.
- Celeste's family moved to the USA from Canada, while husband Bob's ancestors came over from Scotland.
- Janie's family was of mixed German / Irish origin.
- Charlotte's Scots / Irish / English ancestors settled in western Canada. She came to the United States just over a decade ago when she married an American from Paris, TN! Her husband Tony is of Dutch descent, whose ancestors originally settled in Texas but arrived in Tennessee after his Great Great Granddaddy ran away from the posse in Texas. He said that usually happened for one of two reasons: either you stole a horse or a woman. Tony said that, in this case, his Great Great Granddaddy probably stole both!
- Ann's Opa left Amsterdam in 1904 and sailed first to New York before going on to Chicago, being joined somewhat later by his wife and their 8 children, after which her father was born.
- Rebecca is of Scots / Irish heritage.
- Dorothy's maternal family came over from England many generations ago; her father was a German immigrant.
- Gary's ancestors came over from Norway and Sweden in the 1880s during the potato famine. The family got separated somehow, with the children making their way west after they arrived in America on orphan trains. Ever heard of orphan trains before?

Where did your ancestors come to America from? I would love to hear the story of your roots? And how does your story shape how you feel about people wanting to come to America today, in light of our Judeo-Christian teachings about welcoming the stranger and hospitality?

I certainly am grateful that America provided a hospitable welcome to my ancestors when they faced hardship and persecution. My paternal grandfather's family came from Sligo County in Ireland during the potato famine. They were literally starving to death as they sailed to America freezing on the lower berths of a ship.

My paternal grandmother's family came over much earlier. They were French Huguenots (part of the minority French Protestant group) who were being killed by French Catholics and they fled religious persecution, sailing on a ship that landed in Boston where they began a new life and could freely practice their Protestant faith.

My husband Russ might not be here today were it not for America's welcoming his ancestors when they also faced religious persecution. His father's family, as Ashkenazi Jews, were subject to the brutal pogroms of the Russian Czars. They fled persecution and possible Siberian death camps, sailing from Europe to America past the Statue of Liberty, landing on Ellis Island, where the designation "Yiddish" was written by their names as they were welcomed into this country. Unfortunately, they continued to be persecuted in the United States, which serves as a reminder that our nation is far from perfect and we have a long way to go. They made their way from New York to Savannah, Georgia, where they built up a successful bakery and made enough money to even have a fleet of sailboats. They helped found a synagogue that is active to this day. Tragically, the Ku Klux Klan, who not only dislike African Americans but also Jewish Americans (and back then Irish Catholics as well), burned down their bakery, leading them to flee for their lives back up to New York City with only their clothes on their backs. Being highly resourceful, they rebounded and established Cirodkin Brother's Deli, which had the reputation of being one of the best Jewish delicatessens in New York City, where the Marx brothers were regulars. They became an integral part of a caring community in the heart of Manhattan and often would go to see the Statue of Liberty.

Russ' mother's family came over from the Ukraine on the Ship Bremerhaven, also passing by the Statue of Liberty on the way to being processed at Ellis Island. They then moved to Massachusetts, becoming cooks at Smith College, where, ironically, my niece Jackie just completed her junior year and is the editor of their prestigious school newspaper. The Statue of Liberty and Emma Lazarus' poem were so important to Russ' mother that she took her three-year-old granddaughter Rachel out on the Staten Island ferry that went past the Statue and Ellis Island, proudly pointing them out to her and explaining that her family had sailed past them when they came to America.

All of these stories show that it has been part of our country's very spiritual DNA to welcome the stranger with kindness and compassion, knowing the difficult, exhausting, and often dangerous circumstances so many of them came from.

And it is entirely in keeping with our Christian tradition and roots to offer the kind of radical hospitality modelled by Jesus, who reached out to the stranger and the outcast, especially those who were and are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Listen to Jesus' words again when he said: ²⁸***“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”***

In Biblical times, oxen were connected together by wooden beams called yokes that allowed them to pull loads together when working in pairs. Yokes helped to distribute the weight more evenly than each ox needed to pull. Interestingly, when oxen were yoked together, they were able to pull a much heavier load than the two, unyoked, could alone. In the corporate world we call this “synergy.” When two people yoke together and pool their ideas and resources and are aligned in a common purpose a new kind of energy emerges that far surpasses what either could produce alone. Wonderful things can emerge!

I wonder today what might happen if, during this difficult time in our individual lives and in the life of our nation when we are very likely feeling weary and certainly are all carrying heavy burdens, we were to take Jesus up on his offer to be yoked to him, who himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is freely yoked to the God who created him, and who yokes us to each other? Just think of what we might gain! Listen again carefully to what Jesus is freely offering us. He first reassures us that this yoking will not be burdensome to us for he is gentle and humble in heart. Don't we need that gentle and humble spirit to be present with us right now? Jesus tells us that we have so much to learn from him. Certainly, we need all the wisdom we can get right now in making wise choices and knowing how to move forward! And during these challenging times in our individual lives and in the life of our nation, there is an important promise that comes from this yoking that we all so desperately need: we will find rest for our weary souls. For Jesus' yoke is easy, and his burden is light!

Closing Prayer: Let us pray, using some of the words from “God of the Ages, Whose Almighty Hand”:

“God of the ages, whose almighty hand ...

*Refresh thy people on their toilsome way; lead us from night to never-ending day;
fill all our lives with love and grace divine, and glory, laud, and praise be ever thine.”*

We lift up this prayer in the name of Jesus. Amen.