

What About “The New Colossus”?

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Matt. 11:28

4th of July Weekend

Matthew 11:28-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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July 2, 2017

Who was Emma Lazarus, and what she is famous for? There's a big hint on the cover of this morning's worship bulletin. Yes, **Emma Lazarus was the poet who penned the famous words that are inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.** Many of us remember those words from childhood school days, **“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”** But that's only a portion of the entire poem, which I will recite in just a moment.

First, I'd like to share a bit of interesting background on the poet herself. Emma Lazarus was born in New York City in 1849, into a prosperous, cultured Jewish family of Portuguese-Jewish ancestry. Emma began writing poems as a teenager. After her first collection of poems was published, she caught the attention of, and became friends with, folks like Ralph Waldo Emerson. That's impressive company!

The turning point in Lazarus's life was the outbreak of violent anti-Semitism in Russia and Germany during the early 1880s. From that point on, she began a private crusade for her people, and became an advocate for Jewish immigrants fleeing to the United States. She organized relief efforts for thousands and thousands of immigrants, who were mostly impoverished at the time of their arrival to this country. For many of these newcomers, their first glimpse of America was the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.

The statue, sculpted by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, had been conceived of as a gift of friendship from the people of France marking our two nations' commitment to liberty. The initial plan was that it would be erected and dedicated in 1876, in time for the 100th anniversary of the birth of this nation. Due to several factors, however, that didn't happen until 10 years later in 1886. France provided statue, but the United States had to raise the required funds to build the pedestal. Emma Lazarus believed that the statue, even before it was erected, would act as a beacon to the world. So in response, she wrote a poem in 1883 for the purpose of auctioning off in order to help raise money for the pedestal.

Her inspiring poem, entitled *The New Colossus*, captured what the statue came to mean to the millions who migrated to the United States seeking freedom, and who continue to arrive to this day. For reference, Colossus refers to a statue erected in 280 BCE in the ancient city of Rhodes, on the Greek island of the same name. As one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, it stood somewhat similar to the height of the Statue of Liberty. It was destroyed during the earthquake of 226 BCE, and never rebuilt.

The New Colossus

*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
 Glows 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!"*

- Emma Lazarus, 1883

Likened to that ancient Greek statue which represented Helios, the god of light, Lady Liberty became a beacon of light. Yet Lazarus' poem also sets itself apart from Helios in that the "Mother of Exiles," as she describes the Statue of Liberty, is more about being welcoming than conquering. She welcomes castaways, misfits, the impoverished and the homeless who dream of freedom and a better life. She invites refugees seeking relief from oppression and danger at home.

It is important to remind ourselves of these things on this 4th of July weekend – especially the part about being more welcoming than conquering. Reaching out to the weary with open hands and welcoming hearts is an important element to remember as we celebrate our independence and freedoms as a country. It has been an identifying attribute and hallmark of our country's heritage. This is especially true this year in light of the Supreme Court's recent approval of what is generally perceived as a faith-based travel ban from six predominantly Muslim countries, including a hold on all refugees entering the country for the next 4 months while our government reviews its 'extreme vetting' program. And yes, I am fully aware of the need to balance our historically welcoming nature as a country with any legitimate security concerns. We do indeed live in dangerous times.

From a political standpoint, I'll let you come to your own conclusions. It seems to many, however, that we are currently experiencing a dimming of our being a beacon of light. But it has been dimmed before at other points in our nation's history. Speaking personally, **I hope it doesn't lead to an even greater sense of nationalistic superiority, the demonization of those of the Muslim faith, and a retreat into isolationism and tribalism.**

Saying that, we have a responsibility to approach our attitudes toward all these issues through our filter as people of faith, and specifically as Christians. **There is a way of being proud of our country, for instance, without flaunting a "We're privileged and superior because God likes us better and has blessed us more than you" mentality that is prevalent in the almost inbred nationalism that is promoted by far too many Christian groups themselves.**

Perhaps, then, it's a good time to ask ourselves at this point in our country's history if we still really believe in those words inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty, as part of our country's "mission statement," so to speak. "*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...*"

It hasn't gone unnoticed just how similar those words of Emma Lazarus are to those of Jesus, as found in today's passage from Matthew 11. Jesus offers the crowd what has been called The Great Invitation: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Notice, at least on one level, how similar that message is?

Most of the people who have immigrated to this country have suffered under the burden of one kind of oppression or another in their homeland. That most likely includes a good number of your and my own ancestors who immigrated to this country. That is, unless you're Native American and have been here for thousands of years before the European invasion.

In Jesus' day, the Jews suffered under oppression as well. But in the context of this particular biblical passage, **Jesus wasn't referring to the oppression imposed by the Roman Empire, the governmental and political authorities. Instead, Jesus was pointing directly to the burden put on the people by the religious authorities, the scribes and Pharisees.** The scribes and Pharisees had laid an intolerable load of religious laws – their interpretation of the religious laws – on their shoulders. Therefore, the "rest" that Jesus refers to in this passage isn't specifically addressed to those burdened and made weary by their jobs and careers, finances or relationships, or even those burdened by their own vices or addictions. (By the way, I'll be addressing this perspective next Sunday.) It's not that God doesn't care or help in these situations, because God does, it's just that **the rest Jesus offers in this instance is for those who have become weary and burdened by trying to earn God's favor and blessing by attempting to be perfect in fulfilling the letter of the religious law.**

How difficult it *still* is for so many of us today to realize that there is nothing we can do to earn God's love and favor - we already have it, we always did, we always will - and *that*, in part, is what Jesus came to teach us. And from a progressive perspective, this applies not only to those who are part of the Christian faith, but is extended to people of all faith traditions or no faith tradition. God's grace is offered to all!

Rabbis in Jesus' day often referred to the law of God metaphorically as a yoke and *burden*. They promoted meticulous attention to following the law of God and supplied detailed explanations of how it could and should be kept. Keeping the law perfectly, though, as both they and we know, was and is an impossible burden. Yet, the Pharisees insisted on rigid adherence to the law in order for people to win the favor and blessing of God. Sounds like the original version of what we call the "prosperity gospel" today.

But that's where Jesus' teaching comes into play. **Jesus promises rest for those, including ourselves, who are burdened by trying to earn God's favor by strictly following religious laws and set rules of behavior.** As we explored last Sunday, however, this does not give us license to do anything we please, without boundaries. **Our new freedom in Christ comes with a deep responsibility to a new and transformed way of life in which we live as followers – as disciples – of the ways and teachings of Jesus.** Another way to

phrase this is that **God's grace is always lighter and easier to bear than religious legalism!** Some of us have experience with that, learning it the hard way.

Jesus spoke to people, then and now, who were and are desperately trying to connect with God and desperately trying to be good, but who were finding that task impossible and therefore were driven to weariness and despair. If you find yourself in this position, then remember these words of grace from Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

And may it cause us all to reflect anew on this 4th of July weekend upon how we will continue to respond to those words penned by Emma Lazarus 134 years ago, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." Perhaps it can still act as a mission statement that we should take to heart – as a country and as a congregation.

Amen.