

Rest For the Weary:

A reflection on the current refugee crisis
in light of our 4th of July Weekend.

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 6, 2014

I hope all of you had a fun, safe, and meaningful 4th of July! I had a wonderful day, that included sharing dinner at Johnna and Mark Thurston's home, along with Donna Wood and Deborah Hunter. Dinner was followed by a rousing game of dominos (you can tell we're all getting older). Then it was down to the 21st Street bridge over the Arkansas River for a bird's eye view of the city's remarkable fireworks display.

I am one of those who people, however, that sometimes has mixed feelings about this holiday. I am indeed very proud of this country, blessed to be a US citizen, and grateful for all the accomplishments and advancements to society we have made. Yet, with an eye and heart always seeking justice, I am all too aware of our country's misgivings and mistakes, our obsession with accumulating wealth, our selfish individualism at the expense of the common good, and the prideful sense of superiority not just over other countries, but also over people of different nationalities.

The irony, of course, is that **except for our Native American population, our entire nation is made up of people originally from different countries and nationalities.** So as we rightfully celebrate the freedoms and liberties we enjoy in the USA, our creeping nationalism is indeed troubling to me.

Also ironic is that **as we celebrate our own historic immigration into this country, we are so troubled now by the influx of others.** Yes, I am fully aware that we are a country of laws, and that we seek for those laws to be followed and enforced. Yet, as we reminded ourselves this weekend of the **Statue of Liberty's message, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."** we are fighting a very broken immigration system that many members of our US Congress refuse to deal with – primarily because it might hurt their chances of getting reelected. Again, a selfish stance that spits in the face of the common good.

I'm sure you are all aware of the latest battle lines (and I say that almost literally) forming over the **huge current influx of refugees from Central America, mostly young women and their children.** True, they have been crossing our borders illegally and that needs to be addressed. But these folks have come because of a serious humanitarian crisis in their own countries. There is something horrific going on in Central America, though most of us aren't really aware of what that is. But it's causing tens of thousands to make the dangerous and very expensive thousand-mile journey to escape threatening circumstances in their home country.

We are facing a refugee migration at our own borders. And we are ill-prepared to deal with that situation. While some are literally stopping buses from entering their

communities with these refugees, screaming for the 'illegal immigrants' to be sent home, others are seeing this situation with more compassion. There is a **moral dilemma** involved with this situation. And some people are not seeing things a bit differently since unaccompanied children fleeing for their safety are involved. Granted, solutions are not easy given our current immigration policies. But when put into an historical perspective of the migration to our land of opportunity, I wonder if there isn't a better solution and approach than to simply scream, 'Go home.'

So I wonder, in all seriousness, what would Jesus do? While I'm not entirely sure, I know he would have compassion. And I believe we all are called to have compassion as well. Speaking of Jesus, I find it remarkable how similar those inviting and comforting words on the Statue of Liberty seem to be to those of Jesus in today's Gospel reading 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 how similar that message is?

Historically, most of the people who have migrated to this country have suffered under the burden of one kind of oppression or another in their homeland. In Jesus' day, the Jews suffered under oppression as well, as did the Christians in Matthew's day. But in the context of this passage, Jesus wasn't referring to the oppression of the Roman Empire. Rather, he was pointing directly to the burden put on the people by their own religious authorities, the scribes and Pharisees.

This Great Invitation for the weary and burdened to come to Jesus to find rest, like so many other great one-liners from the Bible, has often been taken out of context and somewhat misinterpreted throughout the ages. When examined within the entire understanding of the Gospel of Matthew, we see that the invitation is issued not to those burdened by work, by sin, or even by life in general. Rather, it was **an invitation extended to those burdened by trying to keep all the religious laws.**

The scribes and Pharisees had laid an intolerable load on their shoulders. Therefore, the type of rest that Jesus refers to isn't for those burdened by their jobs and careers or finances, or those made weary by their family and relationships, or by those burdened by their vices or addictions, or even those who have just had a rough and tiring day. It's not that God doesn't help in these types of burdensome situations, it's just that **the rest that Jesus refers to in this passage is for those who have been burdened by trying to earn God's favor and blessing by attempting to be perfect in fulfilling the letter of the law.** How hard it continues to be for so many people, especially perfectionists, to realize that there is nothing we can do to earn God's love - we already have it, we always did, we always will - and that's what Jesus came to teach us about: the **radical grace of God.**

Rabbis in Jesus' day often referred to the **law of God as a yoke and burden.** They promoted meticulous attention to following the law of God and supplied detailed explanations of how the law of God could be kept. Keeping the law perfectly, however, as they and we know, was and is an impossible burden. Yet, the Pharisees insisted on rigid adherence to the law for people to win the favor and blessing of God. Their goodness and righteous deeds would achieve great blessing, and they would be assured good health and prosperity. If they didn't, they would be punished by God and risk losing God's blessing. Have you noticed that teachers of this perspective have never been in short supply throughout the ages? They fill the airwaves, TV screens and many pulpits with this erroneous, legalistic code of behavior, followed by either impending punishment or the reward of gained prosperity. We call that 'the prosperity

gospel.' Like the Pharisees, this approach to a life of faith lacks the very essence of the gospel message itself - the grace of God. And that's where Jesus' teaching comes in to play.

Jesus promises rest for those who are burdened by trying to earn God's favor by strictly following religious laws and set rules of behavior. But we must remember that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. What he offers, then, is not a vacation from the law but a less burdensome way of fulfilling it. **Jesus states, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."** Presbyterian preacher, seminary professor, and biblical commentator Tom Long expresses it this way:

What Jesus offers is not a hammock, but a yoke. In Judaism, the yoke was a symbol of obedience to the law and wisdom of God. Likewise, Jesus' yoke is obedience to the commandments of the kingdom of heaven, a willingness to serve others with humility and mercy.

Jesus' yoke is 'easy,' and his burden is 'light' (Matt. 11:30) not because there is little to do or the way is safely paved. To the contrary, there is a cross to be carried (Matt. 16:24), and the world is full of wolves (Matt. 10:16). The yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light because it is the way of God, and it is profoundly satisfying to the human soul.

To come to Jesus is to be taught gentleness and humility (Matt. 12:29). It is to join with Jesus himself in serving the world in the name of God.

In other words, **Jesus shifts the emphasis by stating the weightier matters of the law are justice, mercy, faithfulness, and love.** Jesus teaches us that our salvation, our redemption, our favor with God – or whatever you wish to call it – is not based on our works and deeds, or even our beliefs, but rather only on God's love and grace. It is *that* knowledge that makes our burden light, not that our lives will become easy or trouble-free.

Jesus spoke to people desperately trying to find God, and desperately trying to be good, but who were finding that task impossible and therefore were driven to weariness and to despair. If you find yourself in that same position, remember these words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Remind yourselves of those words again during this Independence Day weekend as we also recall the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

Amen.