

# “The New Colossus” & The Great Invitation

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

4<sup>th</sup> of July Weekend

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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This morning I'd like to start with a short history quiz. Do any of you know who Emma Lazarus was, and what she is famous for? It's okay to raise your hands and shout out an answer. Yes, **Emma Lazarus was the poet who wrote the poem that is inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.**

Many of us remember the “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” part – 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.

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 the thousands and thousands of immigrants, who were mostly impoverished at the time of their arrival to this country.

The U.S. Department of State claims that between 1820 and 1920, approximately 34 million persons immigrated to the United States, three-fourths of them staying permanently. 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 the two nations' commitment to liberty. The initial plan was that it would be erected and dedicated in 1876, in time for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of this nation. Due to several factors, however, that didn't happen until 10 years later in 1886.

France provided \$400,000 for the 151 ft 1 in. (46.05 m) statue, and a fundraising drive in the United States netted \$270,000 for the 89-foot 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. This 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 have continued to come unto this day. I'd like to share this short poem with you now so that you can better understand its context.

### **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  
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!"*

- Emma Lazarus, 1883

The beginning of Emma Lazarus' Statue of Liberty poem refers to an ancient statue called the Colossus of Rhodes, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Colossus of Rhodes, which was erected at the harbor of the Greek island of Rhodes, is a statue of the Greek god Helios, the God of light. This formidable work of art stood over 100 feet tall (the tallest of its time) before it was destroyed by earthquake in 226 BCE.

Recalling the stature and nature of this ancient statue, Emma Lazarus' poem refers to a new giant statue, Lady Liberty. Likened to the old one that represented the god of light, she became a beacon of light.

Yet Emma's poem also sets itself apart from Helios in that **the "Mother of Exiles", as she describes the Statue of Liberty, is more welcoming than conquering.** She welcomes all castaways, misfits and homeless types dreaming of freedom and a better life.

**Though I don't plan on getting into the current immigration debate this morning, I found it important to remind ourselves of all this on this 4<sup>th</sup> 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 – especially in light of the current political climate that has both political parties arguing about just is who is the most patriotic.**

As an aside, if you would like to engage more in this often-polarizing discussion, I'd like to refer you to the excellent and informative cover story of this week's *Time* magazine, entitled, *The Real Meaning of Patriotism: Why both parties get it wrong – and how to fix it*. We took a look at it in this morning's Adult Church School Class.

And though I personally lean much further to one side of this argument than the other (notice that I'm physically leaning to the left), **I think that we also have the responsibility to approach our attitudes toward patriotism through our filter as Christians.**

There is a way of being proud of our country, for instance, without flaunting an arrogant "We're better than your country," attitude that so many people project. **Or worse, the "We're privileged and blessed because God likes us better" mentality that is prevalent in "nationalism" and promoted by far too many Christian groups themselves.**

Not only as Americans, but also as Presbyterians, we have to learn how to live together with one another with an ever-increasing amount of diversity and pluralism – like it or not. We're not doing a very good job of that in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Perhaps we never did.

**In fact, perhaps 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 struck me this week 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, 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. 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 *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 on their shoulders. Therefore, the "rest" that Jesus refers to in this passage isn't specifically addressed to those burdened by their jobs and careers or finances,

or those made weary by their family and relationships, or even whose burdened by their own vices or addictions. 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.**

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 the law of God 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. **People were taught that if they did what was required of them, in a legalistic sort of way, they would be amply rewarded.** Their goodness and righteous deeds would achieve great blessing, and they would be assured good health and ample wealth.

Have you noticed that such teachings are still alive and well in our day and age? **Airwaves and TV screens, as well as many pulpits, are filled with this erroneous, legalistic code of behavior-and-reward type of works righteousness. But like the Pharisees, such a message 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 before you and I think this gives us license to do anything we please, without boundaries, we must remember this: Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. What Jesus offers is not a vacation from the law but a less burdensome way of fulfilling it. And that, in part, comes through relying not in our ability to fulfill it, but by recognizing that it has *already* been fulfilled in Christ through God's loving and forgiving grace.**

The yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light because it is the way of God, a way that leads to the love of neighbor and a willingness to serve others with humility and mercy. It is a way of that is profoundly satisfying to the human soul.

**Another way to phrase this is that grace is always lighter and easier to bear that legalism! It is *that* knowledge that makes our burden light, not that our lives will automatically become easy or trouble-free.**

Jesus spoke to people who were desperately trying to find God and desperately trying to be good, but who were finding that task impossible and who were driven to weariness and to despair. If you find yourself in that same position, then remember these words of 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 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend upon how we will respond to those words penned by Emma Lazarus 125 years ago, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddles masses yearning to breathe free..." **Perhaps it's a mission statement we should still take to heart – as a country and as a congregation.**

Amen.