

Pentecost 5A (7/9/2017)
Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-14
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

As we mark our national independence, we celebrate the legend at the heart of our national identity. Yet, we also recognize the ways that life in the United States falls short of that legend. Our national pride can blind us to the suffering of those in our midst, which, uncovered, reminds us of our final allegiance to God's reign. There we find rest from our burdens, and we take on the yoke of faith and love.

“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’ sonnet, “The New Colossus,” was engraved on a bronze plaque and installed inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903. Long a symbol of American freedom and opportunity, Lady Liberty stands as a conspicuous welcome to immigrants from the east. And the poetry at her foundation speaks to the legend at the heart of our national identity. If newcomers are “tired,” “poor,” “wretched refuse” yearning to escape the “tempests” and “teeming shores” of other lands, then the eastern seaboard of the United States represents a “golden” entrance to a new home for the “homeless,” and a place of rest for the weary.

As we mark our national independence again this month, we are reminded of the allure of this legend. Citizens of Native Nations have always

called this land home, and African Americans trace their ancestry to people who were brought here against their will. But the rest of us are heirs of the American legend. And, we earnestly celebrate the ways Lady Liberty makes good on her promise – the protections we enjoy under the law, the right to vote and speak and pray as we choose, the opportunity to seek joy and fulfillment. However, **we also recognize the ways that life in the United States falls short of our national legend. We groan with the tired, the poor, the huddled masses who remain among us even today, more than a century after Emma Lazarus wrote her poem.**

Bryan Stevenson is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal organization that serves the interests of incarcerated people, especially those who are wrongfully convicted, excessively punished, or suffering under poor prison conditions. In his 2014 book, *Just Mercy*, Stevenson addresses the issue of women in the criminal justice system through the eyes of a woman named Marsha, wrongfully convicted of a crime and sentenced to life imprisonment at Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women:

[Excerpt from *Just Mercy*, 235-7]

Marsha's sentence was eventually overturned, and she was released.

Nevertheless, social problems like mass incarceration give us pause if we are too eager to embrace the American legend. **Our national pride can blind us to the suffering of vulnerable people in our midst. But when we**

stop and look them in the eye, we are reminded of our final allegiance to God's reign, a reality that transcends national boundaries. "The Lord upholds all those who fall," the psalmist sings, "and lifts up those who are bowed down." God's concern for the lowly and broken is a consistent theme throughout our sacred story, and finds its definitive expression in the person of Jesus. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he announces at the beginning of his ministry, "because he has anointed me / to bring good news to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹ **Good news for the poor, healing for the afflicted, freedom for the oppressed. This is how Jesus embodies God's purpose for the world.**

And, this is the context for his words in our Gospel from Matthew today: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is [good],² and my burden is light." It sounds a lot like "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses." Yet, **Jesus' promise reaches beyond any national affiliation to embrace all who yearn for God's alternative to our disappointed dreams. Jesus offers much more than freedom of opportunity. His invitation is to let go of those impulses that are so**

¹ Luke 4:18-19.

² See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 261.

central to the American ethos, yet so wearisome – the denial of our vulnerabilities, the urge to demonstrate our own worthiness, the drive to acquire ever greater independence and security.

These are the loads Jesus invites us to lay down, for the sake of those of us who thrive according to the American legend and those of us who don't.

Released from the grip of a world that measures our worth according to our accomplishments or affluence, we are able to rest from the rat race.

But God's reign also promises good news for the poor, healing for the afflicted, and freedom for the oppressed. So what do good news, healing, and freedom look like for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated women and their children? If, by Christ's invitation, we remove the yokes that weary us, we also take up the yoke of faith and love. **Unburdened by the weight of self-preoccupation, we take up Jesus' gentleness and humility, his compassion and attentiveness to the needs of others, so that ultimately, no one is cast aside. That is God's defining legend, God's dream for us.**

Come and rest, dear church. Rest in the risen life of Christ. And, trusting in God's promise to embrace all people into God's goodness,³ put on Jesus' sacrificial love. If it's a burden, it's good, and it's light.

³ Psalm 145:8-9.