

**“A Similar Offer of Refuge for the Suffering”**

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**July 5, 2020**

The closing verses in our reading from Matthew 11 seem to have a certain affinity to the words of Emma Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus” written to help fund the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty and cast onto a bronze plaque inside its lower level. “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens,” sounds a lot like, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Each passage has its own specific context and meaning — the first is a sacred invitation offered by Jesus while the second is a national aspiration. Thus, the two texts should not be conflated. Yet they are similar in their offer of refuge for the suffering. This weekend, as we look back on the founding of our nation and reflect upon current realities, I want to examine this common theme found in two texts and consider its implications for us as followers of Jesus and as Americans.

The reading from Matthew has several layers of meaning. On the surface, when we hear Jesus offer rest to the weary and heavy-laden, we think of anyone and everyone who has been worn out by life in many different ways, and surely Jesus does offer rest to such folk.

I think of families who have travelled the long road of grief and are simply exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually. I think of teachers developing lesson plans for in-person and virtual learning, not knowing which approach will be needed. I think of young children whose screen time is usually limited, having to spend all day on-screen, and the parents who have to help them and deal with the frustration that is created by too much screen time and too little normalcy.

I think of individuals and families that have dealt with various addictions and mental health issues, joblessness and homelessness, for so long that they just don’t have any energy left. I think of people dealing with chronic illnesses that can never be cured. I think of people who have been fighting for justice — or if we don’t like that word, just

some basic fairness in regard to race, gender, identity, physical or mental abilities — for so many years that they are about to give up hope.

When Jesus says to all of these people, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” it is a word of salvation, it is an oasis in the desert, it is a message of hope. And since this is what Jesus offers to all who struggle and are weary, it is what we are called to offer in the church. It is a bit more challenging in this time of isolation, but we do offer refuge to those who need it — through pastoral ministry and congregational care, through worship services and fellowship times, through the clothing ministry and the BBQ truck, and through the nature of who we are as a community.

We are a busy congregation in normal times; we invite everyone to engage in service, but sometimes people come to us worn out, needing a place to rest, and that is okay. I remember a family who joined another church I served. They said they came to that church because they heard the staff did most of the work. They had done too much in their previous setting and needed a break. We tried to change our image — we did not want people to think the staff did all the work — but we understood what that family was saying about their fatigue. As followers of Jesus, in the church, we are called to offer rest, not exhaustion.

And yet, while Jesus’ invitation to draw near and find rest speaks to us directly, there is another layer of meaning here. He speaks often about the weariness that comes from a kind of religion that places too many demands on people, too heavy of a burden. And as we continue reading the text, after offering rest, Jesus says, “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 easy, and my burden is light.”

We are familiar with the concept of a yoke, a device that connects animals to someone guiding them. It is an image that was used for religion in ancient times, especially religious law. In a book of the Apocrypha called Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, a scribe known as Ben Sira, says that wisdom’s yoke is a golden ornament (6:30) and he encourages his readers to put their necks in wisdom’s collar (6:24). Ben Sira is writing nearly 200 years before Jesus, but his writing is popular, and so Jesus and his hearers might be familiar with his work. They are certainly

familiar with the concept of a yoke. When Jesus speaks about his yoke, everyone knows he is referring to his approach to faith. In contrast to the Judaism of his time which weighs people down with too many demands, his yoke, his way, is easy.

When we recall that Jesus also says that those who want to be his disciples should deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him, we may be tempted to laugh. This doesn't sound very easy. But this is not a requirement for pleasing God. Jesus' way is the way of grace. God loves us as we are. In response to this gift, we are called to give all in service to others, but this is not a condition of love. Jesus' yoke, his way of faith, is easy. It is all about grace.

Since it is, our way is about grace too. Grace is what we are called to extend to one another and all who come our way. While this may seem obvious, it is not what many people experience. It may seem like we have no moral compass today, people do what they want without any pangs of conscience, and this is true for some. But many people still live with crippling guilt and shame, and too often religion is to blame.

There is a place for guilt, though as I have said before, there is the right amount of guilt in the world, it just needs to be redistributed. But certain attitudes and behaviors should make us feel badly. Grace does not mean we no longer care about our behavior.

I think of a time when I messed up a line at a rehearsal of the musical *Godspell*. I was playing the role of Jesus, and in the scene where a woman has been caught in adultery, Jesus has asked anyone without sin to cast the first stone, and all of the people have put down their stones and walked away, I looked at the woman and said, "Has no one condoned you?" When everyone laughed, I realized my mistake and quickly added, "Nor do I condone you. Go and sin no more."

Grace does not mean we condone sin, it just means we don't condemn people. It is a matter of balance or emphasis. Some churches lead with judgment while others lead with grace. We want to lead with grace and thus provide rest for people who are living with heavy burdens of guilt. And the truth is only in the context of grace can people confront their deepest struggles redemptively.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” says Jesus — rest from the burdens of life, rest from the deep burdens of the soul. He provides rest to all who come and he calls us to offer this kind of refuge to all in need here.

In 1883 Emma Lazarus was asked to write a poem to help fund the pedestal for a gift coming from France, the Statue of Liberty, a symbol of freedom and democracy which was dedicated in 1886. The poem “The New Colossus” and its author symbolize everything the statue is about. It is an Italian sonnet written by a Jewish-American woman contrasting an ancient Greek Statue with a contemporary one made in France. The words were not placed in the pedestal of the statue until 1903, but from the beginning, they were connected to it, and they inspired great admiration and intense criticism, to no one’s surprise.

America is a melting pot, made up of people from around the world. At our best, we aspire to be a free land which welcomes all in need; all who come from contexts of struggle; all plagued by poverty, violence, oppression, and persecution. Yet not only did we Europeans take this land from its first inhabitants, we have always struggled to welcome all who come and to include fully all who are here. Many of our own citizens have struggled to breathe free, to this day... But in every generation, there seems to be tension between the longing to serve as a beacon of hope for the world and the fear that those of us who are here might lose what we have if too many others are allowed in.

When Emma Lazarus wrote her poem about the New Colossus, the Mother of Exiles, Lady Liberty, welcoming the tired and poor, huddled masses — immigrants from Italy, Greece and Russia (many of the latter being Jewish refugees) were arriving *en masse* in America, stirring fierce debate and frequent hostility among “natives” (U.S.-born descendants of earlier European immigrants). So, there was immediate criticism of the poem for being too welcoming.

But the tension that existed in the late nineteenth century over a certain group of immigrants has existed over some group at other times. We refused entry to many Jews trying to flee the Holocaust during World War II. When the 1965 Naturalization and Immigration Act

allowed people to come from certain nations for the first time, bringing with them many different religious traditions — Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism — there was great resistance. Post-9-11, Muslims have been thought to be suspect, and even more recently there has a backlash against Latino immigrants.

As recently as 2017, when a reporter asked how actions restricting the entry of Muslims and Mexican immigrants squared with Emma Lazarus' words at the Statue of Liberty, a senior policy advisor said the words were not actually part of the original statue... which is technically true, but the statue itself is symbol of welcome. As one literary critic has appointed out, Emma Lazarus had a low profile in her time, but her writing has become the subject of much conversation in our time, thus demonstrating, I might add, the enduring influence of the written word.

There are, of course, legitimate concerns about vetting the people who come our way, though refugees and immigrants are vetted much more carefully than our own citizens, who have been responsible for many more deaths in our nation through gun violence and home-grown terrorism. There are limits to how many people we can support, though most immigrants are hard-working people upon whom sections of our economy depend. There are valid arguments about whether we might help people where they are, though we have grown weary of nation building. So how else can we help Syrian refugees? And with COVID-19, all movement between nations is restricted. In fact, as the country with the most cases, our citizens are now not welcome in some places.

But there are many different challenges that accompany national practices of providing refuge. There are many issues that can be debated by thoughtful people in terms of national policy. I do not intend to get into that debate here nor would I presume to tell you where you should stand on any specific legislative proposal. You wouldn't listen to me anyway. I would simply raise a more basic philosophical question, in many ways for us, a theological question.

What should the basic posture of Christians be toward the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free? Set aside the political issues and even the practical concerns. We're not going to implement any policies with what we think while we are gathered

electronically for worship. How should followers of Jesus feel about refugees from war and oppression, like some we have in our church from Pakistan, Russia and Iran? How should we regard Latinos trying to escape poverty many of us have witnessed firsthand in Honduras? Should we want the “homeless, tempest-tost” sent to us, welcomed into our land, if that is possible? Or should the last one in close the door and say, “That’s all. There is no more room in the inn.”?

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” He also says later in this very same Gospel that anyone who welcomes the stranger — the alien, the immigrant — welcomes him, and anyone who does not welcome the stranger does not welcome him (Matthew 25:31-46). And, as a young child with his family fleeing Herod’s massacre in Bethlehem, he was a stranger seeking refuge in the foreign land of Egypt.

I am not saying there is only one Christian position on any specific policy issue. I am saying that the basic Christian posture toward all who suffer is to want to offer help, refuge, rest. If we take the teachings of Jesus seriously, it is difficult to imagine any other conclusion.

As a footnote to this thought — more than a footnote — I should add that our posture toward the stranger is related to our current struggles with racism. It is no accident that our resistance to immigrants focuses on people with dark skin. Until we deal with this systemic sin, we will never cleanse our hearts in the way needed to welcome the stranger.

The hymn we sing now, written ten years after Emma Lazarus wrote her poem, expresses deep love for our nation, but it does not assume that we have fulfilled the vision of our founders which went beyond their practices, many of them being slaveholders. Rather each stanza expresses a yearning for more. “America! America!” the second stanza says, “God mend thine every flaw.”

We have flaws to his day, they need mending, and naming this reality and working toward something better is one of the most patriotic things we can do, and at the same time, a way of following Jesus. There are many weary and wounded people in this world. Our calling is to offer refuge and healing for everyone we can.