

“Refuge for Those in Need”
Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30
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The closing verses we’ve just read from Matthew 11 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 who are weary and are 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 those in need. This weekend, as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and reflect on the beginning of our nation, 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 first part of our reading from Matthew 11 is quite pointed, as Jesus talks about the fickle nature of his time when people don’t seem to be pleased with anyone or anything — which sounds familiar — but the closing verses are pleasant and reassuring. Jesus offers rest to the weary and heavy-laden, which at times means us but also includes people we know and many others around the world.

We might think of families who have travelled the long road of grief and are now exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually, or those dealing with chronic illnesses. We might think of people who have struggled with various addictions and mental health issues, joblessness and homelessness, for so long that they just don’t have any energy left. We might think of the millions who have left poverty and violence in their homeland only to struggle to find a new home. We might think of those suffering with compassion or justice fatigue.

When Jesus says to all these people, “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” it is a word of salvation, a message of hope, an oasis in the desert. And since this is what Jesus offers all who struggle and are weary, it is what we are called to offer in the church. We do so in many ways — through pastoral ministry and congregational care, worship services and fellowship times, the clothing ministry and White Flag, and who we are as a community.

We are a busy congregation, and 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 for the weary, not more exhaustion.

But there are different types of fatigue. Jesus 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 religious teachings in ancient times. 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).

He writes 200 years before Jesus, but his work is popular, so Jesus’ hearers might be familiar with it. They certainly know what a yoke is. When Jesus speaks of his yoke, they know he is referring to his approach to faith. In contrast to some leaders in his time and many in ours who weigh people down with demands, Jesus’ yoke is easy.

Now, granted, 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. That doesn't sound easy. But it is not a requirement for pleasing God. God loves us as we are. In response to this gift, we are called to give all in service to others, but God's love is not conditional, Jesus' way begins and ends with grace.

Since it does, so does ours. Grace is what we are called to extend to one another and to all who come our way. This may seem obvious, but it is not what many people experience. Many still live with crippling guilt and shame, and too often religion is to blame. There is a place for guilt. In fact, there is just the right amount of it in the world. It just needs to be redistributed. But some things should make us feel bad.

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 as all the people 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 means we don't condemn people. It is a matter of emphasis. Some churches lead with judgment; others lead with grace. We lead with grace and thus provide rest for people living with burdens of guilt. And the truth is only in the context of grace can people confront their deepest struggles redemptively.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." He offers rest from the burdens of life and deep burdens of the soul and calls us to do the same.

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.

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 often struggled to welcome all who come. Many of our own citizens struggle to breathe free, 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 come in.

When Emma Lazarus wrote her poem about Lady Liberty welcoming the tired and poor, the huddled masses, immigrants from Italy, Greece and Russia (many of them 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 one group of immigrants has often existed over some group. We refused entry to many Jews fleeing the Holocaust during World War II. When the 1965 Naturalization and Immigration Act allowed people to come from some nations for the first time, bringing religious traditions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism, there was resistance. Post-9-11, Muslims have been considered suspect.

Yet there have been many bright spots in our history as well, times when we have embraced the rich diversity that has enhanced national life. Consider the current men’s soccer team doing well in the World Cup. Because of where they were born or who their parents are, there are players on this team who could have played for Nigeria, Mexico, England, Germany, and the Netherlands. One has ties to Liberia. It may be the best U.S. men’s team ever, largely because of this diversity.

There is a need to vet the people who come our way, though immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than citizens. 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.

But there are many challenges that accompany national practices of providing refuge and added tensions that come with embracing people of different faiths. Yet regarding the latter concern, the Founders were deeply committed to religious liberty and thus included not only the free exercise clause in the First Amendment but the non-establishment clause as well. While many Founders were Christian, we were not founded as a Christian nation, but rather as a nation where no religion is established and therefore all are free to live out their faith and none is coerced.

Ironically, as Steven Waldman notes in a recent *Christian Century* article, most Christian Nationalists would not have been considered Christians in the colonies (July, 2026, pp. 54-55). Congregationalists and Episcopalians were in charge. Catholics could not vote in five colonies, Quakers were hanged for their heresy, and Baptists were thrown in jail. Between 1760 and 1778 in Virginia, 45 Baptist preachers were jailed for unauthorized religion, and when they finally allowed non-Anglicans to get a license to preach, the Methodists and Presbyterians got licenses, but the Baptists refused, saying that to do so would be to acknowledge authority the State did not possess. Our forebears were passionate and feisty folk. They ultimately joined enlightenment thinkers like James Madison in fighting for religious liberty, arguing that the separation of church and state helped both immensely.

There are issues that can be debated, but it's helpful to know our history, and there is a basic question we should raise. What should the posture of Christians be toward the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free? Set aside the political issues. How should followers of Jesus feel about refugees from war and oppression? How should we regard Latinx people trying to escape poverty? How should we treat people of different faiths?

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." He also says that anyone who welcomes the stranger welcomes him, and as a young child with his family fleeing Herod's massacre in Bethlehem, he was a stranger seeking refuge in a foreign land with a different faith. The implications seem clear, and in this instance, being true to our faith is consistent with being true to the best of our heritage in this nation.