

Fifth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A)
Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
July 4-5, 2020
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Grandpa Champion, my Dad's dad, came through Ellis Island at the age of 12, in nineteen-o-something. When I see the Statue of Liberty from the highway as we drive into Jersey City or NY, think of that young Italian boy, my Grandpa, looking at Lady Liberty in awe from the deck of the ship on which he'd crossed the ocean. The first time I visited Liberty Island, stood at the base of the statue, climbed up to the viewing platform inside her crown (her torch arm was still being reinforced), I was with my stepmom Mimi, who immigrated here from Honduras a half century after my Grandpa arrived. She arrived by plane, not ship, but her pride in her adopted country and her love of the Statue that symbolizes "Welcome!" could not have been greater. (When people would hear her accent and curiously ask where she was from, she'd give them a steely stare and say, "Florham Park." ☺)

Some of you were with us for our special Scottish-themed coffee hour after the annual meeting in January, and saw the slide show I presented on the final part of my sabbatical last December. Pastor Mark, Kristiane and I started our trip in Paris and visited the beautiful art museum, the Musee d'Orsay. As we entered, we were greeted by a mini-me of the Statue of Liberty, a 9-foot-high shrinky-dinked version of the masterpiece commissioned by the designer himself, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, 1/16 the size of the original that stands in NY Harbor. Mini-Miss-Liberty used to hold her torch high in Luxembourg Gardens on the Left Bank, next to an American oak given by Americans in Paris after the 9/11 attacks. She was moved to the museum in 2012, where she now holds a place of honor amidst a treasure trove of masterpieces.

Standing next to the replica I could see details that definitely aren't visible from the highway. For instance: Lady Liberty is standing on the broken chains of the oppressed. Emma Lazarus' poem inscribed on the base calls her "Mother of Exiles" and says:

... From her beacon-hand
Glows 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!”¹

In a PBS video about the Statue of Liberty, the narrator, Ken Burns, challenges us to acknowledge that the welcome has not been equal for all people, and that “While we may hope the statue represents our highest aspirations for what America can and should be, it can also be a reminder of where and how far we fall short.”² James Baldwin is interviewed for the piece and names the truth that many were brought to this land against their will in the holds of slave ships. Our ancestors may have been poor, enduring an uncomfortable journey stuffed into a steerage compartment, but they came by choice and when they arrived America was indeed the land of opportunity not captivity.

There is Another who instead of **holding** a light **is** the Light, the Light of the world. He invites all of us:

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

Refreshment may be a more accurate word than rest, though, because along with the invitation to lay down our load is the invitation to accept another one:

“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.” (Matthew 11:29-30)

Yokes aren’t much a part of our suburban lives. In farm country, yokes are placed on the necks of draft animals, like oxen, to enable them to work together and haul heavier burdens. At points, some **humans** have also been yoked, namely slaves and prisoners of war. So, when it comes to people, the yoke is a harsh symbol of subjugation. That changes with Jesus. Jesus yoked Himself to us, in the Incarnation. With the birth of Jesus, divinity yoked itself to humanity. And now Jesus invites us, “Become My yokemate.”³ Our Lord Jesus invites us to be “harnessed to God”⁴ -- to go only where Jesus goes -- to follow Jesus’ every lead. No “nibbling ourselves lost” like sheep that wander. No heading down the

wrong path. No crisis at the crossroads. Yoked to Jesus, harnessed to God, we're much more apt to do the next right thing....

This holy yoke cannot be imposed, though. It must be chosen. Jesus says, "**Take** My yoke upon you...." It's gotta be of our own volition. Free will has full play here. Our translation has Jesus saying, "...my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (*Matthew 11:30*) This Scripture verse is the traditional prayer for pastors to pray as they don the stole before worship. Honestly, there are times I've prayed it and thought, "Lord, it's **not** always easy, and it's **not** always light." So I was relieved to read the explanation that *easy* can also be translated *kind*, meaning well-fitting. The Lord tailor-makes the yoke to fit our individual necks, so that it doesn't chafe. It's custom-made for each of us. Someone has added, "It's lined with love."⁵ And Bernard of Clairvaux has written,

O blessed burden that makes all burdens light!
O blessed yoke that bears the bearer up!⁶

May we who are blessed with so many civil freedoms choose to be spiritually yoked, harnessed, to the One who said, "*And if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*" (John 8:36) By God's grace, in Christ's name, empowered by the Spirit, may we welcome those who seek asylum here and those who have been granted refuge in this land whose liberty is symbolized by the "Mother of Exiles. "

Amen

¹Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus."

²Ken Burns (PBS), "The Mythology of Monuments: The Statue of Liberty."

³Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew (Interpretation)*, Louisville: John Knox, 1993), p. 129.

⁴Robert H. Smith, *Matthew (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament)*, 1989), p. 159.

⁵*Interpreter's Bible*, volume 7 (NY: Abingdon, 1951), p. 391.

⁶*Ibid*, p. 390.

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