

It was the summer of 1984 - 25 years ago - I had a profound, spiritual experience of God & Country. My High School choir had sold Texas grapefruit all year long, to support our trip to Washington DC. Sen. Slade Gorton met us at the capitol. Every day we toured through historic sites, and found venues to sing – our repertoire included traditional patriotic songs. On one occasion, we found ourselves in a church with amazing acoustics. We began to sing a capella that beloved Appalachian hymn – “*O Shenendoah*”. As the music bounced off the walls, we could feel tingly chills down the spine. We sang another song written for the history of America - "*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-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*" Do you know where these words come from? They are the words at the base of **The Statue of Liberty**. As we sang that song, a poignant moment washed over me, as if I were peering into the faces of immigrants, throughout the past 400 years, who, through the decades, sought freedom from foreign shores, in America.

It made me wonder about my own immigrant roots from Mary, Queen of Scots, from Ireland, from England. I don't know what brought my ancestors from lands afar to find a home in these United States of America – whether it was like so many immigrants before and after them, they heard an invitation and they came. Perhaps the invitation came in the form of stories and letters from those who had come before them. Perhaps they had heard about farmland waiting to be claimed. Perhaps they heard the promise of jobs here, a better wage. Perhaps they heard that here they would be free - to worship, to work, to raise a family in the way they believed right. Then as now, immigrants have come here because they heard an invitation that was irresistible: "*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.*" They knew they were the tired and poor - they had large families with no land to inherit; or couldn't find work, or the work they could find paid too little. They were a part of those huddled masses yearning to breathe free - to have a voice in a political system, to speak up and not be persecuted, to worship and not be oppressed. They believed this was a land of liberty and opportunity. Sometimes reality betrayed their dreams. The dream of prosperity falls to the reality of devastated crops, of 12 hour a day factory jobs, or flipping hamburgers at McDonald's. Sometimes, due to illness or lack of proper papers, people were even turned away at the gate. But for most immigrants, the dream persists, even when reality sets in. They have heard an irresistible invitation, and they believe the dream: Liberty and justice for all.

Independence weekend is a good time to reflect upon both your spiritual heritage and your ancestral heritage. Are we not in some sense, all refugees in this world. There is a saying that we all live a little East of Eden. We are all longing to get back to paradise. Quote from Augustine – "*I cannot rest, until I find my rest in thee.*" We long for our home in God. That makes us refugees on this earth, until we secure our rest in God. And, over and over, holy scripture admonishes us to love the refugee, the foreigner, the stranger because our ancestors were strangers in the land of Egypt. We descend from a wandering Aramean, and from the wandering Israelites in search of the land flowing with milk & honey. There may not be a more important lesson in the entire Bible. Because our spiritual ancestors knew what it was like to have been slaves, to have been persecuted, to have experienced pain and suffering. Because they were strangers in a land, the call is to be especially sensitive, welcoming and hospitable to those who are strangers in our midst.

Worldwide, the Statue of Liberty is one of the most recognizable icons of the US, representing liberty and escape from oppression. She arrived in New York harbor on June 17, 1885. The great lady of liberty was a gift to the U.S. from France. The statue, also known as "Lady Liberty", has

become a symbol of freedom and democracy. She welcomed arriving immigrants, who could see the statue as they arrived in the US. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes the scriptural call to freedom & hospitality throughout the world. The statue depicts a woman escaping the chains of tyranny, which lay at her feet. Her right hand holds aloft a burning torch that represents liberty. Her left hand holds a tablet inscribed with the date “July 4, 1776”, the day the United States declared its independence.

For hundreds of years, citizens of every nation & language, have entered this continent with the hope of a new opportunity, a new future. In 1883, people were trying to raise funds to build a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, so that this gift could be accepted from the people of France. They asked Emma Lazarus, a 4th-generation New York Jew, to write a poem for the event. She was well established in literary and social circles & friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson. She was moved by the plight of the persecuted Russian Jews. Thinking of the immigrants she had met at settlement houses, Lazarus wrote the words that expressed their hopes: “*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.*” It wasn’t until 1903, after Emma Lazarus died at age 38, that private donations were made to have her poem mounted in the statue.

When this poem was inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, it quickly became a symbol of welcome for oppressed immigrants around the world. These words reflect the ideal view of our country toward those who seek refuge on our shores. And for most of our country’s history, they have also reflected the reality. Indeed, I am sure that many of your ancestors, as mine, came here, perhaps on a ship that went right past the Statue of Liberty that bears these words. Our country is a nation of immigrants. 1st, 2nd, 3rd generation Americans; a few of us may be 4th or 5th generation. But all of us are here because at some time in last hundred, or 200 years, our ancestors chose to leave their homeland and come to America. And we are here because America, for the most part, welcomed them with open arms. But more than 100 years later, as faithful Christians abiding in this country, we must reflect on the question, does America want “your tired, your poor?”

Jesus Cordova is a bricklayer in Mexico: Two days into his walk across the border, and just fifty miles from Tucson where he could reasonably hope to fade into the background and find work to support his family, Jesus happened upon an accident. A woman had driven her van over a cliff and was trapped inside. Her 9-year-old son had gotten out and crawled back up to the road. Jesus climbed down to the van, where he heard moaning but couldn't get to the woman. He went back to the boy, who was dressed only in shorts and a t-shirt. Jesus started a fire to keep him warm, staying with him overnight. In the morning help arrived. The boy was fine, though his mother died. Jesus was taken into custody and deported back to Mexico.

I like this story, not because it supports one side of the immigration debate or another; it doesn't. I like it because it reminds us that Jesus, just like the vast majority of other undocumented immigrants is a decent hard working man. It reminds us of his humanity. He is guilty of crossing into this country illegally. And yet, it makes me think that this story could easily have been a story that Jesus might have used as a parable like the Good Samaritan.

As citizens we must wrestle with whether we allow every “stranger” who wants to enter our borders to come in and automatically become a citizen. But as Christians, there is no wrestling. The mandate is clear – welcome the stranger, offer hospitality to the refugee & foreigner. And it means that we must treat those here with compassion and that we should create an immigration process that is fair and workable. The church constantly falls short of the ideals offered us in the Gospel. The church is a work in progress. But this process is driven by the fact that, as Walter Brueggemann said, “*the arc of the Gospel is always bent toward radical inclusion.*”

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” These words remind us that America at its best has been a place where those in need could find refuge, where those who suffered could find hope, a place where your ancestors and mine, came and embraced the American dream. Let us hope and pray that the light of Christ & Lady Liberty’s torch will continue to shine, lighting the way for those who wish to enter and become a part of this land. Let it be so. Amen.