Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses...
Matthew 11:25-30

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When I hear the words of Jesus in the 11th chapter of Matthew, I am reminded also of similar words found at the Statue of Liberty. They are the words of the poem, "The New Colossus," written by Emma Lazarus in 1883, and they are engraved on a bronze plaque on the inside of the lower level of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. 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!"

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." They are words that remind me of the responsibility of our great nation to tend to the welfare, not only of our own, but also those who come to our shore, indeed to care for the whole world. We are a nation that is uniquely and specially endowed by God with the blessings of freedom and prosperity; and like all blessings from God, the blessings are not our own to keep, but to share with the world.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses..." One of the reasons that the United States of America is the great nation that we are, is because of the way we have seen ourselves throughout our history as a nation that cares about the welfare of the world. True, there have been times when we have been seen as intrusive and unwelcome; but beneath it all there is more than just looking after our own self-interests, for America is a nation that truly cares about the welfare of the world. The greatness of this nation isn't just in our freedom and our entrepreneurial spirit—the greatness of this nation is also in the unmatched generosity of her citizens on behalf of the world.

We need to remember that, though. We need to remember that we are not here simply to serve ourselves, but somehow to serve God's purposes of blessing for the world. We need to guard our status as the greatest nation in the world, not with arrogance and pride, but with humility, for with great blessings come great responsibilities. Let us never forget the sacred privilege we have—the sacred responsibility, really—to be not only the greatest nation IN the
world, but to be the greatest nation FOR the world.

The other day my mother sent me a prayer that she had found in an old, old book of prayers. It was a prayer for our nation, and it speaks very well to the purpose we have to serve God's goodness and righteousness I want to share it with you this morning:

“Our Father, we thank you for the blessings of life in a free land.
Deliver us from carelessness and indifference. Inspire us to think wisely and clearly.
Fill us with a great desire to play our part well on the stage of life, that our community and our country may be made stronger and better. Help us to share in all ways open to us the freedom that is ours, working always to the end of making the whole world free. So we would be on the side of the Saviour of the world. Amen

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...
Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...”

When Jesus spoke the words we find in our Scripture lesson this morning, he did so into the context of confusion and rejection. People were confused as to whether or not he was the promised Messiah—even John the Baptist had doubts, since Jesus apparently didn't fit the mold of their expectations. And some of the villages in which Jesus had done marvelous things and taught so wondrously—those very same villages had refused to repent of their ways and turn to Jesus.

And so the words before us are Jesus’ answer to the confusion, the questions, the wondering of what's going on in the world, and even the rejection of him by the proud and self-sufficient. Jesus begins his answer with a strong affirmation in the sovereign providence of God; then Jesus points to himself as the One (and the only one) in whom God has chosen to reveal God's self and character and ways; then Jesus invites us to walk with him, offering us refreshment and renewal as our reward.

“At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...”' Just prior to this doxology of praise and thanksgiving, Jesus had noted that the cities and people who should have been his closest followers—those cities in which and those people to whom Jesus had taught and performed miracles—have rejected him. And so it seems a bit ironic, doesn't it, that the first words out of Jesus' mouth would be words of thanksgiving. Shouldn't Jesus be a bit more woeful over his rejection?

And yet he's not woeful. Instead, Jesus turns to God and says, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...” It is Jesus’ affirmation that, despite the confusion and rejection of the world, nevertheless, Jesus remains confident and steadfast that God is still in control. The world may be confused, but God isn't. The world may seek to thwart God's will, but God won't be thwarted.

It's easy for us to forget that, in a world that seems to be spiraling out of control, God is still in control. If we're focusing on all the ways the world fails to respond to God, then it's easy for us to conclude that God isn't in control after all.

But the response of Jesus tells us that, instead of falling into despair at the unresponsive world, we should remember the sovereignty of God that will work all things for the good for those who love him, for those who turn to him in faith. We may experience adversity, and the world may be full of tragedy and all sorts of bad things. But behind it all, God is unmoved, steadfast, completely in control.

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...” When all else is stripped away, God
will always be there. Never forget that behind it all, God is in control.

The next thing Jesus does is affirm that God has appointed him as the One who will reveal the Father to us. “All things have been handed over to my by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”² It sounds a bit convoluted, but at its most basic what we hear Jesus saying is, “At the heart of the revelation is this simple fact: God’s whole truth (‘absolutely everything’) has been placed in and revealed through the Son.”³

I know that to the non-believing world, and to some Christians as well, this kind of exclusivity comes across as arrogant. And yet our faith is built on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the One who reveals God to us, because he was the very incarnation of God. Certainly you find this throughout John’s writings, but you also find it here in Matthew (which predates John's gospel), as well as throughout some of Paul's writings. For example, in Colossians, Paul says this about Jesus:

“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
For in him all things were created: ...all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ...so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”⁴

Don't you see what Jesus is saying here in the 11th chapter of Matthew? In the face of questions, doubts, uncertainty, and even a world that rejects him, Jesus gives us himself as the proper object of our faith. He is the answer! To those who wonder where to turn, Jesus shows us himself.

Again, I know that for some this sounds arrogant—what about all the other good people of different faiths, don't they deserve some credit? Right now, I'm not going to use Jesus' words to argue or enter into debate. Instead, what I see in Jesus isn't arrogance, but loving care and assurance. Jesus is assuring us that we are not misguided to put our trust in him. Jesus is assuring us that our faith is not in vain. To people who are confused, or wounded, or wondering, Jesus says, “I'm all you need.” It is an answer that is beautiful in its simplicity.

Which leads us to the third thing Jesus says in these verses: “Come to me, all you who are weary and 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 easy and my burden is light.”⁵ It is an invitation by the One to whom all things have been committed by the Father. It is his invitation for us to come alongside him and live the kind of life he offers to us. It is an invitation given to those who struggle, to those for whom life is hard, to those who are weary by life's struggles; and his promise is to give us relief, and strength, and rest.

It is an invitation that sounds unusual at first, because in order for us to find relief, we have to take on a yoke. A yoke is an instrument of work, not rest, so how can it be that by

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² Matthew 11:27
⁴ Colossians 1:15-20
⁵ Matthew 11:28-30
taking his yoke upon us, we will find rest? Because it is the yoke of Jesus. A yoke is an instrument of work, but it is an instrument of shared work. When Jesus invites us, he doesn't simply place a yoke upon our shoulders; he shares it with us. His yoke is easy and his burden is light, not so much because it doesn't weigh so much, but because he carries it with us.

It is an invitation to walk with Jesus. Truth be told, the way of Jesus brings relief and rest, because it is the way God intends us to live. Jesus' teaching in Matthew thus far, especially the sermon on the mount, shows us the way of his yoke. It is a higher righteousness than that of the scribes and the Pharisees, and it's not easy to live; yet it brings lightness of life, because when we walk in the way God has designed for us to live, then we live well, and we live free of the burdens of guilt and sin and shame.

Come to me, says Jesus. He offers us a better way.

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...

Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...

When Jesus invites us to walk alongside him, he promises us rest, and a better way of life.

As a nation, let us do the same.

Amen.