

Matthew 11:28-30

“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.” If you have ever had the privilege to stand beneath the Statue of Liberty in New York City, you would have seen these words inscribed on its base. For over one-hundred years these words have called out to people from all nations—welcoming all, no matter who they are, to come to America.

We may not have much appreciation for these words, but we should. For even though we may have been born in this country, our ancestors were not. A parent, grandparent, great-grandparent came to these shores, was welcomed by these words, and made a home here in America. And that is why we enjoy the freedom and way of life that we have today.

But while these welcoming words of Lady Liberty offer freedom from slavery, and economic opportunity—the welcoming words of Jesus offer and give so much more. “Come unto Me,” He says, “all who are weary and heavy-laden, 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 shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

As we prepare to celebrate our nation’s 229th birthday, I believe it is fitting for us to see a comparison between these words of our Lord and the words which welcomed our ancestors who came to these shores many years ago.

They came across the water. Coming from Europe, the only way to reach America was by water. And that is how Christ welcomes us to Himself—by the water and Word of Holy Baptism. There is no way to reach the shores of God’s Kingdom except by water. “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.” (Mark 16:16) “Come unto Me,” cries our Lord—and as Lady Liberty stands high above the waters of New York harbor with arm raised, so Christ stands in the waters of the font, and with welcoming arms, receives us there unto Himself.

“Give me your tired, your poor; your huddles masses yearning to breathe free; the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” Lady Liberty opens her arms to all. And that is Christ in baptism. We who are the wretched refuse; full of sin’s disease; tired and worn out from Satan’s thrashings; stripped poor at birth of every spiritual gift—are welcomed by Jesus. He turns none away. He does not demand to see our immigration papers. He gives us all that we need. He cleanses us in baptism’s waters of the ugliness of our sin. He gives life to our weary body and soul. He exchanges our filthy garments with the clean and new clothing of His holy innocence. This is your Savior. He stands in the waters welcoming every sinner to Himself.

Here in America our ancestors found a land that was rich in resources. Where they came from in Europe, food may at times, have been scarce. But in this country there was plenty of good food to eat so that they could live well-fed and well-nourished lives. Here in the Church, in God’s Kingdom of Grace, the food for our souls is not scarce. Before, in Satan’s Kingdom, we were starved to death. But having been baptized, we have every opportunity to eat richly of the food Christ prepares for His saints.

“I give you rest,” He says. And so He preaches, and He teaches His Word to us—and in that Word He gives rest to our weary souls, removing from us the burden of every sin. At His Table He feeds us with His true body and blood so that we Christians may live well-fed and well-nourished lives.

When our ancestors arrived in America they did not expect to live easy and carefree lives. They got to work. They knew that with freedom came responsibility. Christ did not call you to a life of spiritual laziness within His Church. Rather, having freedom in Him from sin, death, and Satan, we desire to live for Him in His Kingdom.

“Take My yoke upon you,” He says. Freedom from everything is no freedom at all. Jesus freed us from our sins so that we could be yoked to Him; joined to Him as a branch is joined to the vine—not in slavery to the vine, but to receive the sap, the life, from the vine. For a branch that frees itself from the vine is not even free, but will die.

The yoke of Christ is not harsh—it is gentle. He binds you to Himself in Word and Sacrament to give to you, all your life, His good gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. He gives you His Holy Spirit to give you strength to resist sin’s temptations. And He gives you His assuring promise that when you fall He will not disown you, but forgives you.

Our ancestors did not have lives free of trouble in America, and neither will we as we live our lives under God’s grace in His Church. Satan will daily try to make our lives unbearable. The guilt of our sins will plague us. The sinful world will beckon us to live for ourselves and not for Christ.

But remember who you are. You came by water to Jesus. You are free of your sins, for He forgives you. Satan cannot kill your eternal soul—Christ has defeated him with His death and resurrection. You are in Christ, yoked to Him—not to choke you, but that you may live and work in His Kingdom always under His grace.

“Come unto Me,” calls your Lord. No matter where you are in life, He calls to you. No matter how far you have fallen into sin, He calls to you. Even if you have willfully, intentionally walked away from Him and His Word—He calls you to Himself. He gives you rest from the burden of your sin. He forgives you.

No matter who you are, Christ always stands in His Word calling sinners to repentance and faith—lifting high in His hand, not a torch, but the cross. “I died for you,” He proclaims in His Word, “you are forgiven of all your sins; and in Me you have eternal rest and joy and peace.”

“I lift my lamp beside the golden door,” cries Lady Liberty in New York harbor. But Jesus **is** the door. He **is** the way into heaven. And this eternal life He gives to you, for He calls out to you, “Come unto Me, you who are weary... and I give unto you the peaceful rest of paradise.” Amen.