

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John D. Rohrs
3 Pentecost A; July 3, 2011
Gospel: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Freedom and Rest

My grandparents, my father's parents, lived in New York City their whole lives. My earliest travel memory is going to see them when I was a young kid. I don't remember many details from that trip, but I do remember taking a ferry out to see the Statue of Liberty. It was a rainy, overcast day, as I recall, but it didn't dampen my awe when I looked up at that arm reaching into the heavens.

Of course, it wasn't until later that I knew the statue's history: how it was a gift from the French honoring our partnership in the American Revolution, and how it became a symbol of welcome for immigrants seeking a new and better life. The more I learned, the more I came to appreciate Lady Liberty as an iconic image of American freedom, an image best expressed in the Emma Lazarus poem carved into the base: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Beautiful words of welcome and promise, and if they sound familiar it's because we heard something very similar a moment ago. "Come to me," Jesus said, "all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." With these words, Jesus proclaims the freedom of the gospel, and it's interesting that both he and the Lazarus poem speak of rest as an essential element of freedom. For people who are oppressed, whether it's by a despotic government or a divided community or some personal torment, it is impossible to find rest. There's always cause for worry and fear, always the reality of fatigue or hunger or grief; and people in those circumstances long for something – for someone – to lighten their load, to lift the burden of their pain and struggle that they might breathe free.

At its best, at our best, this country offers that rest for people of all races and creeds, all ages and stations of life. We do often live up to that calling as a nation, and we celebrate that on this Fourth of July weekend. But other times, of course, we fall short, and too many people remain poor, hungry, oppressed – unwelcome and unrested even in the land of the free.

When that happens, we would do well to remember the message of this gospel and the invitation at the base of Lady Liberty. They are words of comfort in both cases, but they are also words of challenge. They call us not so much to independence but to interdependence, and they remind us that in some sense none of us will truly find welcome and rest until we all do. Desmond Tutu, who knows something about freedom, puts it this way. He says that people are people only through other people, and one person's joy, peace, freedom is totally wrapped up in that of others. None of us will be free until we all are free, until we seek together that welcome and rest that Christ proclaims in our gospel today.

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Amen.