

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
September 1, 2019

LABOR DAY WEEKEND

*For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Luke 14: 7-14

*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!*

Irving Berlin/Emma Lazarus

If I were to ask you about the song, “Give me your tired, your poor,” I supposed everyone here could tell me that these are the words written on the Statue of Liberty. Probably most of you could tell me the name of the poet, Emma Lazarus. And a few of you could give me the name of the poem, “The New Colossus.” But contrary to popular belief, the 14-line sonnet written by Lazarus is not inscribed on the statue that stands in the New York Harbor and even fewer know the official name of this statue. The statue's real name is “Liberty Enlightening The World.” The inscription isn't even on the outside of the pedestal, as often depicted in cartoons, but rather inside the pedestal—nowhere on the statue itself. And the song we just sang is not by Emma Lazarus but was written for a 1949 Broadway play entitled, “Miss Liberty.” It was the final number in that 1949 production about a Frenchwoman falsely assumed to have been the statue's model. It's a musical comedy and was pretty much of a flop, being overshadowed by two other Broadway musicals produced that year, *Show Boat* and *Kiss Me Kate*. But the arrangement by Roy Ringwald quickly became a staple in the repertoire of high school and colleges throughout the 1950s and 1960s, in the aftermath of the Second World War. During the Cold War, it was programmed at patriotic civic ceremonies celebrating American liberty. I first learned it and sang it in a Junior High Chorus.

Like today's Gospel lesson, it reflects not only the values we have come to hold in common, but also some of Luke's favorite themes—such as humility and concern for the poor. Luke draws on elements of Hebrew wisdom literature. It's worth taking a look because when it is said that we live in a Judeo-Christian culture, this does not mean that the majority of Americans are members of churches and synagogues. It does mean that our common values have been shaped by a worldview derived from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Here is the Hebrew Scripture reference behind today's Gospel:

Prov. 25:6-7;

*Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great;
for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.*

Sir 32: 1-2

*Have they made you ruler? be not lifted up:
be among them as one of them.
Have care of them, and so sit down,
and when you have acquitted yourself of all your charge,
take your place.*

The idea that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble is a common theme in Hebrew wisdom. In synch, Jesus takes a hard look at his society's notions of honor and shame, who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down, and he turns it all on his head. Here's who you should have at your dinner parties, he says: *the people you least want to see in the world*. Here's how to be exalted, he says: *try finding yourself a quiet little spot at the very bottom of the heap*. In his own time and place, Jesus offers a vision of a fresh start, a new world—one that has nothing to do with society's status and power and prestige. No "reality tv" values for Jesus but rather, the values of ancient Eastern hospitality—where if someone asks for your shirt, you give him your cloak as well. And we are reminded that in welcoming strangers, we may be entertaining angels—as in the story of Abraham. Jesus offers a vision of a table at which no one has a place of honor because everyone is in the place of honor. It is a circular table filled with most honored guests because it is God who extends the invitations.

There is wonderful news in this passage. Good news for everyone who has ever felt left out. There is wonderful news for all who have felt the sting of humiliation. The table is open and every seat at the table is a place of honor. There is heart-stirring news in this passage because the table is open for all, and all are welcome with honor.

This Judeo-Christian vision has filtered into our political and social system—influences our vision to which we aspire. It is a vision that is embedded in the creation of the United States.

A country with no king.

No strict class system.

Most Americans identify themselves as the middle class.

Each person has the right to vote without the distinction of owning land.

And there is a day set aside to honor those who labor.

Labor day honors the American labor movement and the power of collective action by laborers who are essential for the workings of society and are honored. This is radical stuff. Don't take it for granted. Yet, as in Jesus' day, injustices and perversions of the vision can threaten to undo it. But, like faith itself, the vision and the values are secure, because they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people.

This summer, I reread a hard, challenging book—*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. First published in 1952 it was hailed as a masterpiece—and tells the nightmare of Ellison's journey across the racial divide and tells truths about the nature of bigotry and its effects on both victims and perpetrators. It's a horrifying tale, yet at the end, in the Epilogue Ellison writes,

America is woven of many strands;

I would recognize them and then let it so remain.

*It's "winner take nothing" that is the great truth of our country
or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled;*

and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat.

Our fate is to become one, and yet many—

this is not prophecy, but description.

It is nothing less than our faith that leads us in this direction—faith is a vision of the world as belonging to God. Just as I was mulling over these things, I received a text message from one of Epiphany’s newest members. She sent a YouTube and said, “This song reminds me of Epiphany.” So I watched and listened. It’s a song from a debut album that isn’t released yet—to be released on September 6th. The song is called *Crowded Table* by a new country music group, The Highwomen. Let me share with you the refrain. It gives me great hope. The vision continues to be held in new generations. It’s the 21st Century closing song of “Miss Liberty.” It is the “The New Colossus” not in the New York harbor but over airwaves, from a new generation. This song offers the vision that Jesus reveals in the Gospel of Luke. It gives me hope.

Crowded Table

I want a house with a crowded table
And a place by the fire for everyone
Let us take on the world while we're young and able
And bring us back together when the day is done

If we want a garden
We're gonna have to sow the seed
Plant a little happiness
Let the roots run deep
If it's love that we give
Then it's love that we reap

And again, the refrain.

I want a house with a crowded table
And a place by the fire for everyone
Let us take on the world while we're young and able
And bring us back together when the day is done

AMEN