

Matthew 11:28

July 5, 2020

“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.” These words are inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. They sound very welcoming. But who exactly do they welcome? Consider what they are saying. Are you poor, homeless, beaten down? We want you! Is your life a wreck? Wonderful! Come to America and live here.

No wonder our country is such a mess. We have been welcoming, not the cream of the crop, but the garbage of society. That’s what wretched refuse is, as Lady Liberty puts it. Maybe it’s time to topple that statue into New York harbor.

There has been talk about toppling Jesus statues. And even if they do, His words stand forever. In Matthew 11 He speaks words which are also a beautiful invitation. Who do these words welcome? “*Come to Me,*” He says, “*all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*” No wretched refuse here. Just those who labor under a heavy load.

We have all been laboring lately, haven’t we? Social unrest is everywhere. The virus appears to be ramping up in many places. And there is also the fact that our nation seems to be divided. Accusations are flying back and forth. People hate each other. Those in office hate each other. It’s tempting to turn off the news channels to enjoy some peace and relaxation. Maybe if we lived like hermits and monks, we would stop laboring under such heavy burdens as everyone out there is putting on us.

Are you listening to this? If so, you’re listening to a Pharisee. Really. In Luke 18 a Pharisee came to church to pray. His prayer was one of thanking God that he was not like other people. I wonder just how similar to his, our prayers have been.

I thank You, Lord, that I am not like the people out there. You know, the wretched refuse. I am not a rioter. I’m not even a protestor. Not a violent one anyway. And I would never point a gun at one who is. I’m not like those politicians who lie all the time. Nor like the news journalists who twist the truth into a lie. And I am not the cause of this pandemic. God, if You have sent this virus as a judgment upon wicked people, it is not because of me.

This is a good Pharisaical prayer. The burdens I bear, others have caused. I don’t need to come to Jesus for rest. I need Him to come to them out there, give them a good kick you know where, and make them better people, people more like me.

Contrast this with what the Apostle Paul says in our Epistle text for today. “*Wretched man that I am!*” he bemoans, “*Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” Paul speaks of wretched refuse. Yet, he does not speak of others in this way but of himself. “I am the wretched sinner! Deliver me, not from them out there, but from myself; from this sinful body of death!”

This is exactly what Jesus means by laboring under a heavy load. He is speaking of the burden of sin. The burden you carry, and I carry, because we are as we confess, “*poor, miserable sinners.*”

Now, He is not suggesting that other people do not cause problems which become a burden to us. But it goes both ways. We cause problems for others, too. Often without even being aware of it. We are all putting burdens on each other, and we often try to help each other with our burdens. But the burden of my sin, only Jesus can take that from me, for only He took the burden of my sin and your sin to His cross.

In Luke 18, along with the Pharisee, a Publican came to church to pray. The burden of his sin was so heavy that he could not even lift his eyes toward heaven. All he could do was to utter the words, "*God, be merciful to me, the sinner.*" No judging of other people here. No comparing himself to others. His eyes were on his sinfulness, not on the sinfulness of others. And this man, said Jesus, went home forgiven.

Today you are in church. Either sitting here in the pew or watching or listening at home. Today Jesus invites you with some of the most beautiful words ever spoken. "*Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" Wherever you are, whatever you have done, you have a place with Jesus. No matter how wretched you feel or how ugly your past, He opens His arms wide to you. Jesus became wretched refuse for you. They threw Him, like a piece of garbage, onto the junk heap of Golgotha. And there He died. He died there for you.

This is why Jesus gives you rest. There is no burden He cannot take from you. Whatever sin you have, Jesus carried it. He takes your sin and replaces it with grace upon grace. He forgives you. All of you He forgives.

I think it is actually very appropriate that Lady Liberty stands high in New York harbor. She rises out of the water with her welcoming words. So does Jesus. He stands in the water of your baptism where He welcomed you into His family. He received you as a wretched sinner, and now calls you His dear, forgiven child.

"*Come to Me*" Jesus calls. And you do day after day in returning to your baptism, remembering that you always have a place of rest with Him now, and so one day you will rest in peace with Him. Amen.