Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 Semiquincentennial of the United States

It seems like she has always borne a torch over New York Harbor, but the Statue of Liberty, or, *Liberty Enlightening the World*, which is her official name, was the brainchild of two Frenchmen shortly after the end of the US Civil War. Edouard Laboulaye proposed a monument to commemorate the centennial of U.S. independence in 1876, the perseverance of American democracy, and the liberation of the nation's slaves. France was to plan and build the statue, and the U.S. provide the site and build the pedestal. Frédéric Bartholdi drew and oversaw the design, including Lady Liberty's iconic crown and the broken shackles of slavery under her feet.

Fundraising proved difficult, however, and the statue was not finished and dedicated until 1886. Among the fundraisers were Joseph Pulitzer, who promised to print the name of every contributor, no matter how small the donation, and Emma Lazarus, who wrote "The New Colossus" as part of the effort. The end of her poem will be forever associated with the statue:

"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!"

You can doubtless hear the resonance between this poem and today's Gospel reading: "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Rest. If I asked you to name the top five attributes of an American, I doubt that the ability to rest would be among them. It is deeply countercultural to be told "You can rest." In my conversations with parishioners, it is much more common to hear "I need to keep busy" than "I'm planning to take a nap." Like Martha, we are afraid to stop our frenetic activity for fear that—well, what is the fear? That the world will fall apart? That the task might fall to someone else for once? That it might turn out we're not actually indispensable?

And yet, in those same conversations with parishioners, I hear how stretched thin you are, how tired, how much you long to set down your burdens. I'm here to tell you: listen to Jesus. In fact, come, sit down at his

feet, like Martha's sister Mary. You don't have to find your meaning in busyness. Because you are already a beloved child of God.

Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you." A yoke is not the absence of work. A yoke is a wooden frame built for two. No farmer yokes a single ox—the whole design assumes a pair, walking together, one bearing the load alongside the other. When Jesus says his yoke is easy, he doesn't mean the work disappears. He means we were never meant to pull alone.

That is, of course, not the story America tells about herself. Ours is a story of self-reliance, of the settler and the entrepreneur and the self-made man, of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, until the phrase became a kind of scripture. We built a civic religion out of not needing help. And Lady Liberty herself, for all her welcome, stands alone in that harbor—unyoked, holding her own torch, asking nothing of anyone but that they come.

But look again at what actually got her built. Bartholdi could draw her. France could forge her. But the pedestal—the ground she stands on—very nearly wasn't finished, because the wealthy American patrons Pulitzer approached first said no. It was finished because 120,000 ordinary people sent in what they could: a dollar, fifty cents, a child's saved allowance, and Pulitzer printed every single name in the paper as he'd promised. Liberty stands over that harbor today on a foundation made of small, shared weight. No one person paid for that pedestal. It took a yoke of thousands.

I think that's closer to what Jesus is offering than what our national mythology usually tells us we should want. Not the removal of the load, but a refusal to let us carry it solo. Not independence, but a shared harness with someone whose shoulders are stronger than ours. As New Testament professor Matt Skinner puts it, "Jesus is in the business of removing the heavy burdens that our societies and systems inflict on certain people."

Now we are not a "Christian nation." As a pastor, I will go to the mat for this most basic right enshrined in our Constitution: your right to worship whom you choose or not to worship at all. But this same freedom means that we are perfectly free to live out the commandments of Jesus. Within the scope of our own lives and actions, we are free to love God and serve our neighbor. We are free to advocate for the principles of equality and

liberty that our founding documents describe. Moreover we are free, as Luke says, to “love [our] enemies, do good, and lend to them, expecting nothing in return. . . . for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” If we do these things, we might actually have the temerity to call ourselves followers of Jesus.

So with due respect and reverence, I think 250 years is long enough to ask a hard question: has the golden door actually swung open the way Lazarus imagined it would? We have not always lived up to our own poem. There have been seasons when we welcomed the tired and the poor, and seasons when we turned huddled masses away at that same harbor, when the “wretched refuse of your teeming shore” was quietly redefined to exclude whoever was inconvenient in that decade. A semiquincentennial is not just a birthday party. It’s an invitation to look honestly at the distance between what we promised and what we've done—and reasonable people, including reasonable people in this room, disagree about how wide that gap still is and what should be done about it. I won’t pretend to settle that from the pulpit.

What I can tell you is that the promise in today’s Gospel doesn't wait for us to get it right. Jesus doesn't say, “Come to me, all you who are weary, once the door has been fairly administered.” He just opens it. Every time. To everyone who is tired and carrying more than they can bear. That invitation has never once been suspended, never subjected to quota or appeal, never contingent on which Congress happens to be in charge. In that sense, Jesus is a truer keeper of Lazarus’s poem than any nation has ever managed to be, because he is the golden door, and he has never once needed to be reminded to leave it open.

So here is what a quarter-millennium is good for: not despair at how far we've fallen short, and not empty pride at how far we've come, but a kind of sober gratitude. Grateful that even an imperfect nation was still shaped, at its best moments, by a vision worth reaching for. Humble that we have so often failed to reach it. And ready to be reminded that our hope was never supposed to rest in Lady Liberty's lamp to begin with. She is a torch. She goes out, she gets restored, she is—like every human project—unfinished and occasionally unfaithful to her own inscription.

But there is another light that does not go out and does not need restoring, and another rest that does not depend on which century’s

document is in effect. Two hundred fifty years from now, whatever has become of this republic, that invitation will still be standing open: come to me, all you who are weary. Whatever else we may get wrong as a nation, now or in the future, let us at least get this right as church—that door stays open here too.

Beloved, you are welcome. You may rest. You are free. Amen.