

## *Give Me Your Tired*

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On Micah 6:6-8 and Matthew 11:28-30

**Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**July 4, 2010**

I have shared with you before two youthful experiences in politics that, when I was a young man, made me cynical about America, cynical to the point of my withdrawing from public life. What I perceived in those events, through my teenaged eyes, was the hypocrisy of America. In the wake of that perception, I foolishly stopped voting and weaseled my way regularly out of jury duty.

When I was 17, I canvassed for the Democratic Party in California with my dad. I went door to door with my American flag pin and my red, white and blue flyers, introduced myself, and I was cursed, called a communist and chased off people's lawns. If the ideal was to engage in political conversation and campaigning in order to achieve a more perfect union, that ideal was shattered in my experience of being called names and chased off. Seemed like hypocrisy to me; no debate, just hollering and posturing.

A year later, I was watching the Watergate hearings on television. My youthful experience was to witness people who were sworn to uphold the law intentionally breaking it, breaking and entering for the sake of political advantage. Even though Sam Ervin and the rest of the Senate Watergate committee became heroes to me, I still came away cynical about politics. As an angry young man, all I could see in the political process was hypocrisy. I had heard all the great words about my country, but up close, in practice, it was a lot of lies. So, I despaired and became cynical and walked away.

Five short years later, when I converted to an adult faith, I reclaimed my involvement in politics. I started voting again, I responded to jury summonses seriously and participated in the work of America again. Still, I know even more of politics at its worst than I did then, but I am no longer a cynic. I may take it as my patriotic duty to criticize my country, but my former cynicism has instead become healthy skepticism. I maintain my commitment as a citizen – to be informed and engaged, but I am skeptical. I suspect there is always more going on than the surface reveals – I am bi-partisan, across the board, skeptical.

I repeat this part of my journey, because I want to tell you about a very strange experience.

The last time I was in New York City, I went out for a morning run. I went up to East 14th Street, turned left toward the Hudson River, then turned south. I ran... (I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I don't really run... I shuffle.) I shuffled. It was great – the weather was wonderful, cool, and not too humid, like this last week here. I was moving along, watching my step mostly, and at some point I looked up... In New York City, on the Hudson River side, down at the end of Manhattan, I look up and there is the Statue of Liberty, right there ahead of me, a little gold glint on her torch from the early morning sunlight.

My eyes swell with tears. I'm crying. I'm running along in New York City, wiping my eyes, and I'm thinking, "I'm a dead duck. They're gonna know I'm a tourist for sure now. I'm crying at the sight of this statue. What am I doing getting all gushy?" And I can't stop it.

*Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.*

## *Give Me Your Tired*

Then I begin to wonder why a skeptic like me is crying at the sight of the Statue of Liberty.

Let's start with that statue. When our constitution was 100 years old, the people of France, in a gesture of friendship and affirmation of the call to freedom and equality, sent us a huge statue called *Liberty Enlightening the World*. The gift was erected on an island at the entrance to New York Harbor. There, the Statue of Liberty has welcomed people drawn to this country by those ideals, the same vision that drew the earliest colonists to these shores—a vision of safe haven from the yoke of tyranny—of a society committed to living out the justice and mercy of God—that was the ideal. It was dedicated on October 28, 1886, the same month that this sanctuary was completed.

Emma Lazarus expressed those ideals of freedom and equality, and providing a safe haven for those seeking a better life, in her poem, "The New Colossus," which is set in bronze at the base of the statue. She compares the Statue of Liberty to the ancient warrior statue that stood astride the entrance to the harbor of Rhodes in Greece:

"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With brazen limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, and her name:  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon hand  
Glows world-wide welcome...  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "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!"

If I had remembered that poem, that might have made me cry, but why? I could have just as easily been thinking of a political cartoon—a sign at Plymouth Rock that said, "Landing place of the first undocumented immigrants." So why the tears instead? Matthew and Micah hold part of the answer. Let's keep Lady Liberty's lamp burning for a moment, while we try to understand why it might touch our Christian hearts.

Two overriding and closely related concerns of Matthew's gospel are hypocrisy and teaching. First, hypocrisy—of the 20 uses of the word in the New Testament, 13 are in Matthew. Matthew is concerned that we do not walk our talk. It is an ancient concern—it's in Micah too. In Micah, God asks, "Do I want your worship? Yes, but only if you walk that talk: if you do justice, love kindness and walk humbly." Matthew calls the Scribes and Pharisees hypocrites because they do not practice what they preach. It is an ancient and persistent concern; it is a constant danger to all who preach and all who worship: that our words will not square with our actions.

That brings us to the second of Matthew's concerns: teaching. Remember, Matthew takes the gospel of Mark and inserts five books of teaching into the narrative. Our text is a summary statement about Jesus' teaching: "*Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give*

## Give Me Your Tired

*you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

There's a lot here—all of it pertinent to our question: Take my yoke upon you and learn from me—being yoked is a matter of learning. The yoke is a harness for two animals—for one who knows the way and is teaching the other, who doesn't know, by coming alongside the learner. We learn the way by being yoked to the teacher.

Being yoked is a matter of learning a way of doing. For Matthew, learning is not primarily intellectual understanding; learning is learning a way of life, learning to *do*—that's why a yoke; we are led in a way (of justice and kindness). We take on a yoke that leads us in a path, in the appropriate direction. The closest Old Testament parallel to this yoke is here in Micah: to *walk humbly with your God*.

Now you can see how closely the two themes of teaching and hypocrisy are linked: walking in the yoke keeps us from hypocrisy—it's not merely words; it's doing the teacher's way—that's learning. Then, this small passage says that in this yoke we find a rest. The "rest" is still work clearly—work in the yoke, but the "rest" is a release from other yokes, from other bondage.

Jesus says: Take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light, as opposed to others. We are all bound to something; we are all servants of someone. We're all yoked to some master or another. As Bob Dylan's words in the call to the worship this morning said, "You're gonna have to serve somebody."<sup>1</sup> For instance, if you escape from tyranny to come here, you will be un-harnessed from that but harnessed to something else, some new discipline (here, the discipline of democratic freedom).

Jesus says here: Set aside your other heavily burdening yokes and take mine on—this path will form you in gentleness and humility; it will keep you from hypocrisy. And then he says that there is an ease, a lightness in his yoke.

All right—[if we walk the talk, walk humbly with our God in this yoke, we escape hypocrisy and we are properly taught (to do justice and love kindness).] But how is this easy or light?

This is the picture: taking on this yoke is like putting on the shoe that finally fits—after trying to squeeze ourselves into the form of a self-serving, arrogant, or unconcerned people, ultimately, that just doesn't fit—it's not what we were made for. [Jeremy was just telling me what a huge gift it is to find his call, to do his job by doing for others ... what could be better than that? What could fit better?] Then, this, Christ's yoke—to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly—this is the true fit for the human soul; it is light in that way. And the yoke is not burdensome because Jesus is the other soul in that yoke with us—a very capable partner. And because it is Jesus, there are certain things we don't have to carry: our past failures, our need for retribution, our unrighteous anger. Christ is yoked to us in forgiveness—there's no burden of the past in this yoke. So, it fits. Christ is in it with us, and we are not burdened by our past failures.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Dylan, "Gotta Serve Somebody," Special Rider Music, 1979.

## Give Me Your Tired

And that is our link back to south Manhattan. I think we all know that America is hard to pull off. America is informed citizens voting thoughtfully and working together civilly to find a way forward together. We are a nation of immigrants and slaves who found success through a horrible history that included usurping land from others and the toil and suffering of slaves. We have a hard history and very high calling. As a young man, I thought, since we failed at the ideal, I was excused from the job.

America is an ideal. If we pursue an ideal and fall short, we are human beings who have done our best and need forgiveness, but there is integrity in our pursuit. We missed, but we sought the ideal. There is great integrity in that pursuit and not a whisper of hypocrisy. Failure is not hypocrisy. It is truly more blessed to fail than to withdraw.

When we ignore the ideal, that slides us down into hypocrisy; it's throwing off the yoke and rejecting the path. But, if we state them, if we say, "Yes, those are our ideals, and we should be called to task whenever we fail and fall," then when we fall, we get up and pursue them again—that's integrity. We don't abandon the hard steps. We take them one at a time.

Here's what I mean. There's a speech in the film, *The American President*, that I wish someone would deliver off the screen someday—it's about a real ideal. This speech called me out on my hypocrisy and called me up to the ideal. Here's part of it:

"Everybody knows America isn't easy. America is advanced citizenship. ... You gotta want it bad, 'cause it's gonna put up a fight. It's gonna say, 'You want free speech? Let's see you acknowledge [someone] whose words make your blood boil, who's standing center stage and advocating, at the top of their lungs, that which you would spend a lifetime opposing at the top of yours. ... You want to claim this land as the land of the free, then the symbol of your country can't just be a flag; the symbol also has to be one of its citizens exercising his right to burn that flag in protest. Show me that, defend that, celebrate that in your classrooms. Then you can stand up and sing about the land of the free.' ... This is a country made up of people with hard jobs that they're terrified of losing. ... We are a nation afraid to go out at night. We're a society that has assigned low priority to education and has looked the other way while our public schools have been decimated. We have serious problems to solve, and we need serious people to solve them."<sup>2</sup>

When I stopped voting at age 18, I became the hypocrite I thought I was rejecting. When I refused to participate in the legal system, I threw off the yoke of advanced citizenship and abandoned its ideal. In 2008, there were 230 million people of voting age in the United States. Of those, 132 million voted. That's about 57%, which is the highest percentage of Americans voting since 1968. That's 100 million people throwing off the yoke of serious citizenship. We complain about the government and don't participate in the government. Of course, it's more than voting, but government of, for and by the people requires the people to show up.

Why did I cry, when I saw Lady Liberty shining out in New York Harbor? I'm not exactly sure, but I know in that moment I could see the ideal, standing very real in this world, and I felt how I

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron Sorkin, *The American President* (screenplay), CastleRock Entertainment/Universal Pictures, 1995.

Available online at <http://www.awesomefilm.com/script/apresident.txt>.

## *Give Me Your Tired*

had once abandoned it in my own hypocrisy and I could feel how far our nation was from it..., and yet – there it was: shining and real.

America is advanced citizenship, but those who, like us, know what it is to be called to be citizens of heaven we know how to bring the perseverance and idealism of advanced citizenship to the political process. Of all people, we should know how to pursue the ideals of compassion, inclusion, civility, and justice and know how to stumble on our way and get up and do it again. Because we know what it is to be yoked to an emboldening and forgiving God. And in that integrity of the forgiven pursuers of the ideal, we are not defeated; we are liberated and empowered. As people of faith, we can lead this country to a more perfect union. But we do need to show up.

You become a citizen by participating. The freedom to which we are called in America is a yoke, a harness of responsibility, not merely a right. We have serious problems to solve, and we need serious people to solve them. And Presbyterians should always be counted among them.

Finally, last Sunday I had the privilege of sharing a meal with some of you and with one of our guests from the Uniting General Council. Bishop Maake Masango came as a delegate from South Africa. He is a close friend of Bishop Desmond Tutu – Maake owes his life to Desmond, who secured his release from prison and torture under the tyranny of apartheid. I asked Maake what I should say to you, my American congregation, on the Fourth of July. He didn't hesitate; he said, "Tell them about April 27, 1994." That date is parallel in South Africa to our July 4, 1776. April 27, 1994 was the day that the first post-apartheid, truly democratic vote was held in South Africa. And he said, "Tell them this story.

"We got up early to vote that day, but by the time we got to the polling place there was a very long line. It would end up taking us six hours to get to the front of the line where we could vote. In the line were people of all colors, and people of all colors working at the polling place. Among those waiting joyfully in line was an older woman who had been brought by her daughter in a wheel barrow. It was a very hot day, and one of the white women who was working the polling place came through the line and said to the old woman, 'It's so hot out here. Move up to the front of the line. You are a senior citizen, you can move up.' And the woman said, 'No. I've been waiting for this day for 99 years; I can wait a few hours more!' When she got to the front of the line, she cast her vote. And then the 99 year old woman asked to see the woman who had invited her to the front of line. When she came over, the woman from her wheelbarrow said, 'I've voted now. NOW, you can call me a Senior Citizen.' And three days later she died, having touched the ideal..."

Maake leaned across the dinner table and said, "Tell them, 'You are still a light to the nations. Don't squander what you have inspired others to do.'"

You are still a light to the nations. Don't squander what you have inspired others to do.

Lady Liberty yet lifts her lamp above the world, a light to the nations.

"Give me your tired, your poor,

## *Give Me Your Tired*

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!"

May God bless us to fulfill the democratic ideal of American compassion for the tired, the poor and the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Let God's people say, "Amen."