

Texts: Isaiah 58:1-9a
Matthew 5:13-20

Rev. Ann Ferrell Lewis
First Presbyterian Church of Snohomish, WA
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Let It Shine!

In New York Harbor, the iconic figure of the Statue of Liberty has been a welcome sight to immigrants and refugees, since it was first erected over 130 years ago. Lady Liberty wears a robe and a crown, and she holds two things in her hands: a tablet with the date of our nation's independence, July 4, 1776, and a torch which her arm raises high in the sky. At her feet lies a broken shackle and chain. As you may know, it was a French political thinker who first proposed the concept of a statue as a gift from the people of France to commemorate the values of democracy and the ideals of enlightenment, as well as the hard-won victory of the union and abolition of slavery following the U.S. Civil War. The torch this enormous lady holds is a symbol of enlightenment, lighting the way to freedom, showing us the path to liberty. The statue's official title is "Liberty Enlightening the World".

On a plaque at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, there is a poem, which reflects the welcome this statue has been for many. The poem ends with these famous words:

*"From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
'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-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

For the many immigrants, and refugees, who endured a long journey by ship to enter the United States through Ellis Island, the Statue of Liberty was a welcome sight marking their entry into a nation where democracy, freedom, and opportunity offered hope for a new life. But the Statue of Liberty has not always been a reassuring symbol to everyone, especially to those who know that racism and oppression have continued in this land. From the day the Statue of Liberty was dedicated, African Americans saw

the statue as an ironic symbol of ideals which were not realized. W.E.B. Dubois, the Harvard educated sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, and prolific writer was sixteen years old at the time the Statue of Liberty was dedicated. But he wrote that as an African American he never found the hope so many immigrants found in the Statue of Liberty, because to him, she was a reminder that his people were not fully accepted as equal citizens.

And this reality continues today. We would like to say that in this country it does not matter what color your skin is, what gender you claim, what sexual orientation you possess, what religion you follow, what language you speak, or how much you earn – that all have equal rights – but the truth is that all are not treated equally, prejudice and bigotry remain; liberty and justice for all has still not been obtained – in spite of the ideals we uphold.

The history of the Jewish people and the ancient nation of Israel goes back to the critical event when Pharaoh let the slaves go, then changed his mind and chased right after them. They crossed the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army nipping at their feet – and when they were safely on the other side – they celebrated their newfound freedom. The Exodus was the seminal event that was critical to their history – it was a reminder that God was with them, that God had a purpose and a promise for them. And yet, their hard-won freedom did not cause them to establish a longstanding society of freedom and justice for all. Injustice and oppression remained. Isaiah speaks for God and holds the people accountable saying: "If you are fasting and wearing sackcloths in an effort to worship me, but at the same time oppress your workers, and quarrel and fight among yourselves, you are not doing anything to please me, and I am not interested. What I want is for you to loosen the bonds of injustice; to give freedom to the oppressed, and break the chains of slavery. If you want to please me, share your food with the hungry, invite the homeless into your home, take care of people in need." This is what pleases God. This is the kind of worship God wants, that we take care of one another. And the consequence of doing this Isaiah says is, "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly, your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am."

Isaiah directly connects working for justice, freeing the oppressed, sharing food, welcoming the homeless, and taking care of basic needs as doing exactly what God wants – this is the condition for making your light shine. This is what God asks of us. And so, we must figure out how we will respond to the very real refugee crisis in our world. And how will we respond to shifting approaches to immigration? Will we focus on isolating ourselves from strangers because of fear? Or will we do whatever we can to offer gracious hospitality? How do we walk the balance between national security and compassionate welcome?

One Superbowl ad you may already have viewed was produced six months ago, by Anheuser-Busch, but the content has already stirred some controversy because of the timing of recent events. It tells a romanticized back story of Adolphus Busch making his way to St. Louis from Germany and walking into a bar. A stranger tells him, “You don’t look like you’re from around here.” Then others in the bar turn hostile – telling him, “You’re not wanted here...Go back home.” But another immigrant reaches out to him and buys him a beer. That newfound friend is Eberhard Anheuser, and another American dream is launched.

Many, if not all of us, can trace our own family history back to some other nation. Our families were once immigrants too. Some of our ancestors may have been brave travelers making a new home in a foreign land, others may have been welcomed by friends or family. Who was there to welcome your family? Do you know? Or was it so very long ago, that you have no memory?

In yesterday’s Seattle Times, there was an essay by Hania Younis, a Seattle engineer, attorney, & real estate broker, who was born in Michigan. Her parents immigrated to the United States from Syria in 1962. Her father was a doctor who set up his practice in a small town in Michigan where there was exactly one Arab Muslim family in town – theirs. Hania tells the story of a Catholic family with 10 children who lived in town. When one son was brought to the emergency room, Dr. Younis provided treatment. Afterward, he asked the boy’s mother why she had never come to see him before. She replied that they couldn’t afford to. So, he told her to bring all ten of her children to his office the next week and he would only charge her for one. From that point on, this family claimed Dr. Younis as their doctor. But years later at a high school reunion, one of the daughters from this large Catholic family revealed with tears to Hania’s sister that the real

reason her mother hadn't sought treatment from Dr. Younis before was because she hadn't wanted to go to a Muslim doctor. Hania reflects on this and writes: "People may not have gone to him because of his religion, but he would never have turned them away because of theirs."

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks the words of the Beatitudes which we heard last week, but which are worth us listening to again: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; Blessed are those who mourn; Blessed are the meek; Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; Blessed are the merciful; Blessed are the poor in heart; Blessed are the peacemakers; Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven. And he followed this up by saying to his followers: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world."

The light you and I have is the light of God's power at work in us. It a light that burns bright as we do what God asks of us. When you have a light to shine, you don't waste it by covering it up, but light is meant for sharing, for raising up high, so that all may see the glory of God's goodness.

I've recently been reading an interesting book my mother told me about. It's been on the New York Times bestseller list. It's called, "The Hidden Life of Trees." The author is a forester in Germany, and he explains the science of trees in a rather anthropomorphic way, describing trees almost as social creatures, able to communicate with one another, to identify their own kind, to nurture their children, and support the elderly, and to cooperate and share with one another. A lot of this, they do at a much slower pace than we do – but they do it, nonetheless. And other organisms help in the process. A whole system of fungi in the soil of the forest act as fiberoptic cables or a "wood-wide web" to enable trees to share news about insects, droughts, and other dangers." And other plants and shrubs and grasses are in on this communication as well. It really is a fascinating book, backed by scientific research published from a variety of sources.

As you learned in elementary school, every plant relies upon the process of photosynthesis to survive. Leaves are critical in this process as they collect carbon dioxide from the air, and receive energy from the sun,

which turns the carbon dioxide and water sucked up through the roots into sugar, which sustains life for the plant. Some German researchers were studying photosynthesis in beech trees in an undisturbed forest and they expected that the rate of photosynthesis in the trees would vary from one tree to another. Obviously, different trees, even in the same forest, have different exposure to the sun, different soil conditions, different amounts of access to water. Some trees soar into the canopy of the forest, soaking in all the sunlight they can get, while others remain in the shadows below. Some trees are strong and robust, while others are thin and scraggly. The researchers expected that differences in conditions and access to resources would make a difference on the rate of photosynthesis. Those trees who prospered in the best of conditions, and with the most water and sunlight, were expected to have a faster rate of photosynthesis. But they were stunned to discover that in this particular undisturbed forest of beech trees, all of the trees had the same rate of photosynthesis! And they discovered that the way this was happening was because the trees were sharing their resources with one another underground through their roots and the wood-wide-web of fungi. The trees were taking care of one another. “Whoever has an abundance of sugar, hands it over to the trees with less. Whoever is running short, gets help.”¹

And I can only think that if God created trees to share the benefits of the light they receive, with those who are in need, that this is exactly how God calls us to live as well. Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, in all the good that you do – in your sharing, in your caring, in your welcoming the stranger in my name. Let your light shine in your work for justice and freedom. Let your light shine as you share good news of the gospel.” Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine! Amen.

¹ Peter Wohlleben, “The Hidden Life of Trees,” Munich: Ludwig Verlag, 2015, p. 16.