**Homily for July 2, 2023 Matthew 10:40-42 “For the Welcome Never Ends”**

*Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”*

The Jewish poet and activist Emma Lazarus was barely 38 years old when she passed away from lymphoma. But in her brief time among us, in the middle of the nineteenth century, her bold poetry and deep, compassionate heart literally changed the course of our country. She is most famous, of course, for her poem The New Colossus:

***Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land; here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles. 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-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”***

This Fourth of July weekend we celebrate our nation, from its origins as a British colony through its emancipation from that indenture, to becoming a world power and, arguably, the greatest country in the world. And this morning, with the assistance from the words of Ms. Lazarus and of Jesus himself, we will contemplate the essence of what has made us who we were, who we are, and who we yet hope to be. And I will be proudly pounding a deep, resonant drum today: our genesis and our legacy are both bound inextricably to how welcoming we are.

Jesus sums up the ancient practice and thought about welcoming: it’s never about just an individual; when one is welcomed, they are embraced as the proxy for their whole family, clan, race, country, religion…and his teaching to his overwhelmed disciples makes it even more comprehensive: *“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.* This is quite the encouragement for our recently humbled followers, sent out to change the world and sent home deeply wounded and aware that the world usually doesn’t give a sniff about changing. But where they are welcomed, as they are welcomed, Jesus himself is also included, and God in God’s fulness is there, too.

As they have recently discovered, and as the human family continues to explore, there are many different flavors of welcoming. Jesus describes three, each of which has developed distinctively American aspects over the recent centuries. His three categories of welcome are welcoming the prophet, welcoming the righteous, and welcoming the servant. It should not surprise us that these bits of wisdom are *exactly* what those chastised disciples needed to hear, and I bet they are just what we need to hear, too.

The welcome given to the *prophetic* ones among us is well documented in scripture, and it isn’t very fluffy or warm. Prophets in our Judeo-Christian tradition are not soothsayers of future events, but rather social commentators who try to compel people onto better paths. Their hearts and heads are full of justice, and they are both enraged and exhausted by the slovenly ways we treat one another on this earth. Jesus is warning those in his little band whose hearts and words lean prophetic that their rewards will inevitably be harsh. Persecution, imprisonment, often martyrdom, these are the fare we feed to prophets. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Ghandhi, Greta Thornburg, *both* Alexandria Ocasio-Cortes and Marjorie Taylor-Greene, these sorts of folks, whose life-work becomes the attempted improvement of the outer world. Look at their lives; if you are a prophet, you know the reward that awaits you.

Jesus next talks of the *righteous*, a big category within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, that list could go on and on. And while being righteous and being self-righteous aren’t always the same thing, often enough folks get ensnared in that religious egotism, because while the prophet tries to amend the outer world, the righteous ones are seeking to amend the inner world, starting with themselves. This requires a certain amount of discipline and sacrifice, and often leads to an impatience with and a disdain for those who haven’t done their spiritual work. The reward of the righteous isn’t as brittle and risky as the prophetic payoff, but it isn’t exactly rosy, either. If your inner life is in good order, that is a nice bonus, but be aware, says our Jesus, that those who aren’t there yet will often find you pretentious. Holier-than-thou is how we unfairly but usually describe the righteous.

I want to offer just a tiny recap and help us notice what Jesus is doing here, using the master teacher’s trick, the *via negativa*. This ‘negative way’ lifts up patterns of being that seem laudable, but then exposes the tender underbelly of those habits. I am sure that the original disciples, full of zeal and spirit, took their prophetic role and their righteousness quite seriously. For them and for us, Jesus doesn’t exactly discourage these choices, but he does illustrate what lies ahead of us when we make them. And then, like every great storyteller, he offers the third choice…

I am summarizing this way of living as the *servant* way, since the ‘offering-a-cup-of-cold-water-way’ is kinda clunky. And while the prophet seeks to reform the *outer* world, and the righteous seek to reform the *inner* world, the servant seeks to improve the quality of life for others, right here, right now, just as they are. True to his oriental roots, Jesus quietly talks of what we would describe as *karma* yet again, assuring his followers that whatever way you choose, there is reward. Whatever cause you champion will have its effect.

And all of this brings us squarely back to this patriotic day, our celebration of the freedoms we enjoy in this enormous country, and to the poem still gleaming from its plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty. Fun fact: her internal metal framework was built by [Gustave Eiffel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustave_Eiffel). Lady Liberty was dedicated on October 28, 1886, a few clicks more than one hundred years into the American experiment. The statue is a figure of [Libertas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libertas), the Roman [goddess of liberty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberty_goddess). She holds a torch above her head with her right hand, and in her left hand carries a tablet inscribed July 4, 1776 in Roman numerals. A broken chain and [shackle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shackle) lie at her feet as she walks forward, commemorating the [national abolition of slavery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_of_slavery_in_the_United_States_of_America) following the [Civil War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War). After its dedication, the statue became an icon both of freedom and of the United States, seen as a symbol of welcome to [immigrants arriving](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_the_United_States) by sea.

As Christians and as Americans, we have choices to make, guaranteed both by public policy and pulpit. As we have been experiencing of late, there are many, *many* ways to be American and/or Christian, but not all ways are effective. Not all ways are *pro bono*, for the public good. My takeaway from Jesus’ teaching is that effective Christian practice in the real world can be prophetic and/or righteous and/or servant style, but that the first two have so much more baggage! The world stones the prophets and dismisses the righteous, but a cup of cold water on a scorching day is always a blessing! If we devote ourselves to the servant way, arguably the most Wesleyan way, we will reap the rewards of restored community and rebuilt trust, the rewards of an America more in line with its founding principles. We were the original welcoming nation, enriched by our diversity, presided over not by statuary of a despot or a deranged dictator, but a mighty woman! The Mother of exiles! And from her beacon hand glows world-wide welcome, a welcome that we enforce or discourage by our personal, civil, and national choices. Here’s to making good choices! Amen.