

February 2017

*"Give me your tired, your poor,
your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, . . ."*

These words, written by poet Emma Lazarus and posted on pedestal of the Statue of Liberty have, for decades, welcomed the foreigner to the shores of our land. They are words that have described the position of our country, a place that has welcomed the immigrant into a land of hope where a pathway to a better life could be found.

The words "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," sound very similar to a message that the church has proclaimed for generations:

*"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest."
(Matthew 11:28)*

The posture of our country in welcoming the foreigner has been compatible with the position of the church. But today there is a disconnect between the position of the country and the mission of the church. Our President's recent Executive Order suspending the country's refugee assistance program and banning visas from seven countries seems a far cry from the words "give me your tired and your poor."

The bishops of the Northeastern Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church recently met in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a region naturally equated with farmland, Pennsylvania Dutch, and the Amish. But these perceptions do not accurately describe this area. Lancaster is America's refugee capital. It has 20 times more refugees per capita than the rest of the United States, having welcomed over 1,300 refugees since 2003. Within the city there are several United Methodist Churches that have historically modeled what it means to settle families and advocate for the immigrants in their midst.

Just outside the walls of our hotel, a place where we are safe and comfortable, there are immigrants who have become disenfranchised and afraid. Even those who legally have been given a right to become a part of our country are now wondering if they are truly safe and welcome. Others have fears about travel and future employment. Still others wonder when they will see friends and family who reside in another country. The huddled masses yearning to be free have all of sudden become very alone and afraid.

We write you today, the people that we serve in the northeastern section of our country, urging you to embrace the gospel message of providing rest for all who are weary in the midst of a land that has begun to build walls of division and discord. In response to Executive Orders from the President, it is our hope that you will once again embrace the mandate from Jesus to be in ministry to the least, the last, and the lost among us.

This is the time for the church to do what it does best – love our neighbors as we ourselves have been loved. We urge all United Methodists to be intentional in providing a ministry of prayer and presence in our churches and throughout our communities that

bear witness to our grace and love. We implore you to preach and proclaim an alternative rhetoric to the message of fear and anger that is being generated by those with power. We invite you to step forward and provide safe places of sanctuary for those who long for a place of care and advocacy.

We believe that we have the opportunity and the call from God to welcome the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses with a message that simply says, "Come, and we will, in the name of Christ, give you rest." May it be so.

We invite you to pray with us this prayer:

Creator God, before life began, you reached deep into the soil around the world to gather rich red clay, fertile black soil, white sand, tan and brown earth and created us; people of every hue, every culture and of every nation and called us good. We praise you for making us different. Yet through all of us, you pulsed the same red rich blood and breathed into us the same breath, your Spirit.

Redeemer God, forgive us when we allow color, culture and national boundary to become the enemy of hospitality and dignity. Forgive us for stigmatizing the name immigrant. In the midst of life's complexities, let us never give up or give in to quick fixes but to be the innovators, the creators following your example. Forgive us for forgetting that we have a rich lineage of immigrants.

Sustainer God and protector of all, sustain and strengthen us for the journey ahead. Give wisdom, and boundless love to the leaders of our nation and the leaders of our communities, schools, government and congregations. Give us the courage and humility to lead people toward security and justice, prosperity and righteousness, safe borders and safe passage.

Bless those born within our borders and those who crossed our borders to find a new home. May your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. It is in the name of Christ that we pray and commit to welcoming the stranger, loving our enemies, and praying for those who persecute us.

Amen.