

A Sonnet in Bronze

Text: Genesis 12: 1-3; Matthew 5: 1-12

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A promise made . . . the power of blessing . . . a sonnet in bronze . . . and a Syrian family seeking refuge: I carry each of these in my heart today.

The sonnet is a perfect place to start . . . especially on a weekend filled with patriotic tenderness. Most of us are familiar with the words as they are embedded in the collective unconscious of our country. I memorized them in the second grade for a school play about America. They were written by Emma Lazarus in 1883 and go like this:

*"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!"¹*

Her words are cast in bronze and are prominently displayed on the pedestal beneath the Statue of Liberty. The author died before her poem would be immortalized in that way. Still, she expressed with such simple eloquence some the values at the core of who we are in this land, or at least who we aspire to be.

The statue was then and still is a beacon of liberty to the world, and a sign of hope to millions who have come to our shores seeking freedom and a new future. And though no single country is pure, and no one nation is perfect; though no boundaries are without blemish, and no people are without fault; I deeply value Miss Liberty's symbol and blessing. And I know I'm not alone.

Which leads me to a promise once made . . . a blessing offered long ago and far away. It wasn't at all like a poem cast in bronze. No, much deeper, more mystical, profoundly formative, and nearly archetypal: it was a promise written into the human heart by the spirit of God.

Abraham was the one to first receive it. He was the one to become the father of Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith. Suffice it to say he came to a day on which he was totally apprehended by the call of God – something that would shape and follow him the rest of his life.

It was a simple promise. "I will bless you," God told them. And, just to refresh our remembering, blessings in the Bible are very powerful. They are life changing. They are irrevocable. They are reciprocal. Like a trustworthy dining room door, they swing on a hinge. They are both a gift and an expectation. "I will bless you," God said, "so that you will be a blessing . . . and by you . . . all families of the earth shall be blessed."

Hear the sequence in that. God blesses so that we will also bless. There is simply no halfway to

it. To be blessed by God expects, demands, requires that the gift is spread and shared, multiplied and set loose.

Which brings me to this morning . . . real time, you and me, here and now. We have been so immeasurably blessed. Really. Truly. Blessed. We have received goodness and mercy, grace and plenty, love and hope and home. And because of that we always live in perpetual moments when the reciprocity of those blessings is due.

One week from now two families are coming to town. They are Syrian families who have been living in refugee camps in Jordan for at least several years, hoping and praying that all of the vetting and security and checking will open their way to America.

Chris George is the Executive Director of IRIS, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services in New Haven. He is constantly asked to walk the fine lines among religion, politics and basic human dignity. A few weeks ago as he was introduced at an event the host said, "resettling refugees is the Christian thing to do." George quickly corrected him. "This?" he queried. "It is neither political nor religious. It's American. Radical welcome is who we are. It is what unites us."

Of course "Christians need look no farther than Matthew 25 to find Jesus praising people who set a table for the unknown. Jews have a Holiness Code defining what it is to be a Jew, and find repeated numerous times that willingness to welcome the stranger is a core value. And the Koran requires Muslims to welcome unknown travelers." ²

Again, this is all in my heart today . . . a promise made . . . the power of blessing . . . a sonnet in bronze . . . and two Syrian families seek refuge. And actually, over these weeks, there will be five such families looking for home and hope – and we all know how important these are to all of us.

I urge our prayers, and daily, for these families and our efforts. I urge a willingness to learn with cultural sensitivity and compassion. I urge that we open up the larger minds that God has given us, and our arms too.

May the living spirit of God be with us as we return a small measure of the blessings we have known, and our community to new neighbors and friends yet to be. Amen.

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¹ Emma Lazarus. Sonnet first published under the title "The New Colossus."

² Susan Campbell. "Welcoming Refugees Isn't Political – It's American." [Hartford Courant](#), 12/27/15.