

The theme for my meditation today is welcome. How appropriate that today is St. Valentine's Day, the holiday that is a celebration of love because for Christians welcome and love go hand in hand.

The Statue of Liberty has always been the symbol of America. There is a poem at the base of the statue by a woman named Emma Lazarus entitled The New Colossus. The words are

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!"

Unfortunately at a time when many are fleeing war torn areas, America's image as a land of welcome and refuge is under attack. Fear mongering and hate speech are making targets of anyone deemed different by virtue of their race, their religion, their nation of origin. How else do you explain the popularity of the stands made by the Republican frontrunner, Donald Trump?

(2) The Old Testament texts reminds our Israelite ancestors that once they were wanderers looking for a home. Deuteronomy 26 verse 5 states "*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien...*" Because of that history they are to be welcoming to aliens who live among them. Deuteronomy 26 verse 11 says "*Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.*" Welcoming the stranger, the alien, the one who is different has been, if you will, almost an eleventh commandment.

(3) The lesson from Romans reinforces this concept of welcome by reminding us God makes no distinction in the household of faith. In Romans verse 12 we read "*For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. Anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord has done all that needs to be done to be a part of the family.* Romans 10 verse 13 states "*For, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*"

(4) In times where difference is looked down upon, it is the job of every Christian congregation and every one who calls themselves a Christian to stand for the extravagant welcome implied by our Romans' text. No one is to be excluded from our fellowship.

(5) How are you as a member of this church, helping to extend this extravagant welcome to anyone, first who calls upon the name of the Lord, but

perhaps not of our religious household? In John 10:16 Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” An example of this took place in Cuba this week when the heads of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox churches met to discuss and agree to ways where their two churches could work together. But not just among Christians, but to those who are outside the household of faith but are just as right with God as we are. John 3:16 says “for God so loved the world” not “for God so loved only those who believe as we do.”

(6) As we come today and participate in the Lord’s Supper, let us reflect on the ways fear and tradition have worked to keep us from apart then claim the power of Christ’s grace and mercy to be more welcoming.