

Deuteronomy 10:17-21

¹⁷For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.

Matthew 5:43-48

43 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Let's Keep Our Nation Great

"You shall love the stranger," writes the author of the book of Deuteronomy, attributing the words to God him/herself. As I thought of those words, and I considered that tomorrow is Independence Day, and as I recently took the ferry into Manhattan to see a concert with Hyesun, my mind took me to The Statue of Liberty, such a welcoming sight to so many strangers who have come to this nation over the past one hundred thirty years. You can't help but feel proud as an American when you think of the hope that such a colossal statue represents to so many people, some of them being our own ancestors.

The Statue of Liberty was inspired by a French writer, politician, and abolitionist **Édouard René Lefèvre de Laboulaye** (try saying that a few times) who himself was inspired by the Union victory in the American Civil War and the ending of slavery in our nation, which, incidentally, was largely the result of events that

occurred exactly one hundred fifty three years ago in 1863 in a little Pennsylvania town called Gettysburg. Historians believe that the Battle of Gettysburg was THE decisive battle of the Civil War, and it was on July 3rd, 1863, the last day of the battle, that the Confederates launched what came to be known as Picket's Charge, which proved disastrous for the Confederacy. The South would no longer have any real chance of winning the war, and the final result would be the abolition of slavery in the entire United States. The story is told that **Édouard René Lefèvre de Laboulaye** (yes, I said it again) was having dinner with the artist **Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi**, and after dinner had said, "If a monument should rise in the United States, as a memorial to their independence, I should think it only natural if it were built by united effort—a common work of both our nations." Bartholdi took the ball and ran with it, getting both the French and the Americans on board with the project that was finally completed in 1886. Inside the pedestal of the statue is a bronze plaque upon which is written a poem by Emma Lazarus titled "The Great Colossus." We are familiar with a part of that poem:

"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!"

Housing the homeless; welcoming the stranger; accepting the refugee; all this relates to advancing liberty, freedom. These are ideals to which Americans strive, and when we make advances toward these ideals we feel good about ourselves as individuals and as Americans. When we fail to make progress, when we curtail human freedom, when we shun the stranger, when we don't provide refuge for the persecuted, when we don't open our homes to others, we should feel bad as individuals and as a nation. We may come up with excuses for our lack of hospitality, which always boil down to our reluctance to risk losing something we consider our own, but God reminds us that we were once strangers in this land – the Israelites were strangers in Egypt.

We may in turn rationalize our inhospitable behavior by labeling others as our enemies from whom we must protect ourselves. When violent, deranged people perform acts of violence against Americans, some conveniently attribute their violent tendencies to their religion which they think will justify closing our doors

to anyone belonging to that religion, even when leaders and the vast majority of those who follow that religion completely condemn those acts of violence. We would even restrict the liberties of certain ethnicities or followers of a particular religion because of the possibility that some among those “strangers” may be dangerous to our well-being. But Jesus leaves us no wiggle room; in today’s Gospel lesson he instructs us to *love our enemies*, not just our neighbors; how are we, as Christians, any different from anyone else if we only love those who are like us, those who are Christian, or those who are white or those who are black or Asian or who were born in Staten Island? And if we had an Epistle lesson today it would have been 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul describes what love really is; it’s patient, it’s hopeful, it’s not-at-all self-seeking, and it endures all things. Yes, we should feel bad, when we as individuals or Christians or Americans fail to advance liberty or welcome strangers, **because we are living contrary to God’s commandments, to Christ’s commandments, and when we do that we feel the rub.**

Which is how I understand THE FEAR OF THE LORD. Some people understand this in a distorted way, like God is our enemy who is out to destroy us for the slightest transgression, and so they fear some cataclysmic wrath. ***But God is not out to destroy us because we’ve already done that. We have already rebelled against God, and he is out to restore us!*** Our fear stems from our awareness of our separation, and the only way I know to alleviate the fear is to reduce the distance between his will and our will. The fear comes from knowing our own propensity to go astray; thus the Hebrew lesson states, “worship him alone; hold fast to him.” Your fear should result from your letting go of God. If you want to escape fear, do as Jesus commands; “Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” Corraling and bombing and starving your perceived enemies is not going to stave off your fears. There aren’t enough bombs in the world to bring you any security apart from God.

I’m not naïve; I know that there are people out there who want to kill and maim others to instill fear in everyone. And as hard as we may try to come up with a simple explanation as to why they act as they do, it can’t be done. Studies have tried to link it with social or economic conditions, or with religious beliefs, but whenever they do they find that there are always exceptions to any rule. Very few repressed, marginalized people blow up busses. Very few Muslims are terrorists, and nearly all true Muslims would deny that ISIS in any way adheres to the core

beliefs of Islam just as very few Christians would deny that the behavior of radical church members like those of Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas as adhering to the core values of Christianity – the Baptists themselves don't affiliate with them.

We can't know the reasons why anyone commits crimes. But that statement itself points us to the answer. While we may never know the reasons why people commit terrible acts, the better we know people, the more chance we have of intervening and preventing them from committing terrible acts. We need to do our best to know others. We don't do that by stereotyping. We don't do that by isolating ourselves or them. We do that by loving them, and loving them means welcoming them, tending to their needs, and getting to know them. As ordinary folks living in Staten Island it may be hard for us to get to know folks living in Afghanistan or Nigeria; they live far away and speak a different language. But we have plenty of opportunity to welcome the stranger in the house next door, the one working at the cash register, the one you see collecting cans and bottles from our trash cans. This is what Jesus is getting at when he says to love our enemies, not just those who look like us or work with us or think like us; anyone can do that. But Christians are called to love those they don't know, and love them truly, and in so doing we make the world a better, safer place for everyone.

I can look into my own life to see how this plays out; I was a hellion in the 9th grade. The reason for my hellion-ness? I couldn't tell you. It was complicated, and I still haven't figured it out. I gave my parents a hard time, I gave my siblings a hard time, I gave my teachers and most of my peers a hard time. The only people I did not disrespect were my closest circle of five or six friends, most of whom were also hellions. There was no single individual who cured me of my hellion-ness, but reflecting on that time of my life I realize that there were teachers and others who welcomed me despite my obnoxious disposition, people who I figured saw something redeeming in this rather troubled person standing in front of them, people who encouraged me and addressed my psychological / social / spiritual needs, *PEOPLE WHO LOVED ME WHEN I SEEMED HARDLY LOVEABLE. LOVE CAN TURN A PERSON AROUND, AND TURN ENEMIES INTO FRIENDS, AND IT CAN START IN OUR OWN BACKYARD.*

What makes our country great? The fact that we welcome strangers and try to turn enemies into friends. The United States has been the melting pot of the world for over two hundred years, and at some point in time our ancestors were

probably shunned and persecuted and discriminated against – that’s what happens when someone invades another person’s comfort zone; we try to push them out. But that’s not what Jesus teaches us to do. The United States is still an experiment, a bold experiment in liberty and tolerance and hospitality. We embrace the ideals that Emma Lazarus articulates in her poem, “The Great Colossus.” Inasmuch as we live up to those ideals we are pursuing God’s will and can enjoy true peace and true liberty. May God bless America by leading us to love others, even the stranger, even those who we may now consider to be our enemies.