

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
6 July 2025  
Deuteronomy 10:17-21, Psalm 145:1-9; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48

“A New Colossus”

Growing up in my family, whether for an ordinary weeknight dinner or large gathering, there was no separate children’s table. We sat with the adults, shared the platters of food, and listened to their stories. Time after time, meal after meal, year after year... we came to know those stories by heart, which was the point, really – to hold them in living memory, lest we forget who we are, where we came from, and what it cost to get here...

...because, as a family of immigrants and refugees, legal and illegal, those mealtime stories were nearly always about the escape from the Armenian genocide and the dream of America. Sometimes, amidst the energy, laughter and bits of singing at the table, all would suddenly grow quiet when particular details were recalled – close relatives rounded up in the dark of night, mothers and siblings sobbing while being separated and secret plans to escape, sometimes with the help of strangers, hoping they could be trusted.

My own father was given to one such stranger, an older woman who pledged to take him to Haleb (Aleppo), and then north to Marseilles, where she promised to get him on a ship to America. He made it to Ellis Island, and a page from that ship’s passenger manifest hangs in an honored place in our home today.

No matter where my dad began his dinner table stories, he would always come to the moment when he first laid eyes on the Statue of Liberty – a 9-year-old boy alone on that boat, gazing at the lady with the lamp. He would say, “I just wanted to reach out my hand and touch those robes -they seemed so real.”

Years later, my brother and I took our families to visit the newly re-opened Ellis Island site, in the shadow of that same glorious statue. We watched our own children reach out their hands to touch their grandfather’s name on the Wall of Memory. As it happens, my son James was the same age as my dad when he arrived.

And with that, two 9-year-old boys touched – the memory of my immigrant father and the fingertips of my native son, alive and free only because his grandfather was granted entry eighty years before, sailing past that famous poem by Emma Lazarus on the pedestal, words he could not yet read in English, but was experiencing first-hand:

*Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*  
(*The New Colossus*; 1883)

Or, as we are reminded in today’s reading from Deuteronomy,

*He loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.  
And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.*

Sadly, my sons never met their grandfather, but they grew up hearing *me* tell his stories, time and time again, meal after meal...., so they will hopefully not forget who *they* are, nor lose sight of what this country, at its truest and purest, offered our family and can still offer our world today.

And so, as we close our weekend celebrations of Independence Day, you might appreciate why I so dearly wish that our national anthem could be changed from the *Star Spangled Banner* to *America the Beautiful*, which Episcopalians know as the hymn, *Materna*:

*O beautiful for patriot dreams that see beyond the years,  
thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears!  
America, America, God mend thy every flaw,  
confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.*

A dream so powerful, a possibility so splendid, that a foreign mother facing genocide would dare turn over her precious, first-born into the hands of a stranger, in the desperate hope that her boy would make it to America and her family survive.

Thankfully, of course, that immigrant boy got through. My dad settled in Brooklyn, started school, went to work, wore his country's uniform, opened a small store, got married and raised a family. His mother, my Grandma Rosie, eventually came across the border from Canada with no papers, with her two younger sons. Uncle Harry became a US citizen *after* he was drafted – sworn in on a US Army ship, just before he reached Normandy for the D-Day invasions on Omaha Beach. And Grandma was sworn in some years later, on the very day I was born – 70 years ago today.

They all cherished and honored their American citizenship, worked hard, never missed an election, and were card-carrying, unwavering members of the old Republican party.

So...no one better look me in the face in our current state of affairs and dismiss me as naïve or hopelessly biased. We can and we do, of course, differ politically on how we approach national *issues*. But as a Christian family in *this* house, gathered around *this* Table, hearing the sacred stories that *we* must never forget, I pray that we stand absolutely clear and together in our Gospel *values*. That is the *only* way to remember who *we* are and the new colossus *we* are called to create, and there is nothing naïve or hopeless about that.

I say all of this as the proud and grateful daughter of a man who, until his dying day, never forgot his wish to reach out and touch the garment of the lady with the lamp, a man who believed in a country that would never boast of might, but aspire only to good.

*America, America, God shed his grace on thee,  
and crown thy good with brotherhood  
from sea to shining sea.*

This is, for me, so much more than a patriotic song, but a heartfelt prayer to God...

...and I do wonder if it might not also just be God's heartfelt prayer for *us*.

Amen.