

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
First congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Isaiah 40: 30-31, Psalm 121, Luke 5: 1-6

We The People: All in the Same Boat

I remember the moment we walked into St. Peter's Square in Rome. I was on sabbatical and Paul and I were looking for the line for the Sistine Chapel. We did eventually get there, but before we found Michelangelo's ceiling, we were drawn to another extraordinary work of contemporary art. Entitled "Angels Unawares" by Timothy Schmalz, a Canadian artist, we saw a life size boat made of bronze perhaps 20 feet long positioned right off center in St. Peter's Square.

The life boat was packed with 140 figures, refugees from many times and places in the world on their way to somewhere hopeful. As we walked around the sculpture it felt like the boat was on the move, animated by a wind that pushed it toward Bernini's massive columns, moving it ever so slowly to its destination of hope. Commissioned by Pope Francis in 2019, the sculpture was installed in the Vatican to honor World Migrant and Refugee Day.

As I studied the figures in the boat more closely, I saw a face that looked as I imagined my great grandmother, Eleanor, would have looked in 1915 clutching my grandmother (then a baby) to her breast as they sailed from Cork, Ireland for New York Harbor seeking a better life.

I could see that the characters looked exhausted, expectant, anxious, lost, hungry. Some wore shoes, others were barefoot. Most were standing peering toward a far off horizon. Each one holds a unique story about what propelled them into the boat. Two Angel wings stand tall above the passengers' heads keeping watch. The artist's statement indicated he was inspired by a scripture passage from the Letter of Paul to the Hebrews 13:2, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*"

Peering closer, I remembered the families we have welcomed here in Old Lyme over the years, the Hamous from Syria, the Kazadis from Congo, the Poppals family from Afghanistan, among others. And, of course, Malik and Zahida of Pakistan and New Britain, CT whom most of you know, self-deported this May due to their very tangible fears of our current Administration's inhumane policies.

This counterculture artwork was placed in the epicenter of the Roman Church's Power in the Vatican, seemed a statement in itself about the other power, the soft power of neighbor love and respect. In hindsight, it seems a parting gift from Pope Francis to the world.

As a former Catholic turned Congregationalist, I appreciate the wisdom— and take it to heart on this July 4th weekend of fireworks and barbecues- that freedom from tyranny is not guaranteed, not set in stone. In fact, it's slipping through our fingers in real time as more and more policies are enacted that disenfranchise and dehumanize most people in the boat.

As political historian Heather Cox Richardson wrote in her letter this July 4th: "Just as in the 1850s, we are now, once again, facing a rebellion against our founding principle as a few people seek to reshape America into a nation in which certain people are better than others...(The men who signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4,

1776, pledged their “Lives, [their] Fortunes and [their] sacred Honor” to defend the idea of human equality.

Ever since then, Americans have sacrificed their own fortunes, honor, and even their lives, for that principle.”

How are we to respond, O God?

When our youth group took a trip this spring to Liberty Island, we spent some time climbing up into the base of the Statue of Liberty, the “Mother of Exiles” as Emma Lazarus called her.

Inscribed on the pedestal are Lazarus’ famous words. In many ways, they are today’s scripture, too:

“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!”

When Lazarus wrote this poem, *New Colossus*, in 1883, immigrants were entering the United States in great numbers, including people from Italy, France, Greece, and Russian-Jewish refugees, among others. Likewise, Lazarus’ poem itself is a multicultural melting pot: an Italian sonnet written by a Jewish-American woman, celebrating a statue forged in France and given in friendship to America.

The broken shackles one can view at Lady Liberty’s feet signify the emancipation of enslaved peoples and the end of tyranny. Fun fact: The tablet in her arm represents the law and written on the tablet in Roman numerals is (you guessed it) the date of... the Declaration of Independence, July 4th, 1776. Her flame and torch conveying the light of liberty shining across the world.

As our youth group waited for the return boat from Liberty Island to Manhattan, a quote by Benjamin Franklin was painted on a sign nearby. “*Where liberty is, there is my country.*”

That word *Liberty* has stayed with me since our field trip.

It is a prayer for today. *Liberty for all who seek safe harbor. Liberty for those being unlawfully detained. Liberty for those whose liberty has been stolen. Liberty for those living in fear. Liberty and justice for all.*

If we look at the liberating ministry of Jesus in the gospels, he is often exactly where the need is greatest. In the boat, on the shore, at a home of friends, in the dusty street where those seeking healing are gathered.

In our passage from Luke, Jesus climbs into the boat on the Sea of Galilee, does some teaching, hears the frustration of the fisherman and then encourages them to try again, to go back out. To row into deeper waters.

Take courage he might have said. One of the amazing things about this story is that (the soon to be called as disciples) actually listen to him. They trust, they climb back in the boat to fish farther off shore trusting that Jesus is with them. In doing so, the fisherfolk end up with so much fish their nets are unable to hold the catch. There was more than enough for all.

What touches me most is that Jesus gets right into the boat. He meets them where they are. He doesn't sit this one out. That’s the call of ministry that Jesus models to us today. It’s the call of our faith.

This week, there were numerous meetings for our immigration ministry undertaken with a large interfaith collective of CT clergy and lay leaders under the

inspiration of our lawyer friend, Glenn Formica. The organizing has been intense as an infrastructure for those needs have been imagined and then put into place. As our volunteers have background checks completed and fill out an on-line questionnaire, we're nearly ready to begin visiting or calling those detained and support their families. Some have already begun to do so!

Thank you to our church leaders, Christine Harrington and Carolyn Hartsfield, for your diligence, determination and countless hours already spent clearing the way for this emerging ministry.

We're in the boat, nearly ready to go where we need to go...where we are needed...*Take courage*, Jesus says.

As the late world theologian and Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann, has written, "As we go to the places where we are called by God—sometimes gladly, sometimes reluctantly, always in anxiety—we are drawn into the newness of God's future."

Sadly, Bruggemann passed away last month at the age of 92. Author of 120 books and frequently a great help to many preachers, Bruggemann's most famous work is called, *The Prophetic Imagination*. His words resound in this moment:

"The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined... The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger.

Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only (thinkable) one." In my mind's eye, I see again the prophetic bronze sculpture of the immigrants seeking safer shores. I see the bravery of those embroiled in the mayhem of Liberty's losses and pray to the Mother of Exiles today, who watches over us all.

I have in my heart a CT family whose father has an ICE check in on Monday in New York. Please keep them in your prayers.

Here at FCCOL, I'm grateful for the new and ongoing ministries of hospitality and imagination that fuel us and keep us vibrant here at FCCOL as we honor the humanness of one another and our neighbors.

Climbing into the boat with Jesus and one another we'll head out to deeper waters where the heart of compassion, mercy and justice leads us. We might just meet more angels along the way.