

“LIBERATION THEOLOGY—LIKE A SLAP IN THE FACE”

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Readings: “Revelation” by Julia Esquivel

The words of the poor
are knives
that bury themselves in our flesh
and cut,
and hurt, and draw out
infection.

The cry of the poor
is clear water
that rinses off our makeup;
we can let the mask fall.

The eyes of the poor
are two mirrors,
we need not be afraid
to see ourselves there.

The nearness of the poor
reveals Jesus,
excellent Counselor,
God with us,
Prince of Peace,
Fire that burns away
all chaff
and purifies gold.¹

from “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front” by Wendell Berry
...every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the World. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace

¹ Julia Esquivel, “Revelation,” <http://mypage.direct.ca/j/julio/esquivel.html>.

the flag. Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.

...Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox who
makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.²

Sermon

Today as part of my focus this year on theology, I will explore Latin American liberation theology. This primarily Catholic theological movement originated in the 1960s and 70s. This was an extraordinary era for the Catholic Church: Vatican II opened the windows and let in the fresh air of new ideas. At the same time, all over the world individual consciences were raised about the plight of oppressed people. As a result, movements to liberate the oppressed ignited in many places. Latin America was one such place.

During the past fifty years, Latin American liberation theology arguably has been the most influential theological movement not just within Catholicism but within Christianity. It reached its peak during the Reagan years when the United States and the world focused much attention on Latin America. The impact of Latin American liberation theology continues today, particularly through its enormous influence on other burgeoning theologies of liberation. These include black, feminist and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered theologies of liberation.

Today in Latin America, the liberation theology movement persists despite continued severe challenges. Over the years, its adherents have been the target of attacks from both the church hierarchy and from dictatorial governments and their military and para-military henchmen. Those who have felt inspired to proclaim a message of liberation have faced censure from the church and, worse, the bullets of death squads. Many thousands have paid the ultimate price for their support of the movement, from Archbishop Oscar Romero to the four American nuns infamously raped and murdered in El Salvador to hundreds of thousands whose murders have been little noted beyond their villages or neighborhoods.

Our own Fellowship had a significant and somewhat controversial encounter with liberation theology in 1987. After a great deal of debate—and some considerable consternation among a few members—the Fellowship voted to take into sanctuary a couple fleeing persecution and political violence in El Salvador. The U.S. government considered this couple and thousands of others who had similarly fled Central America to be economic refugees. As economic refugees, the government declared that they had no legal right to be here. Through its vote, the Fellowship recognized the couple as political

² Robert McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 107.

refugees who deserved asylum in the United States. In the absence of governmental asylum, the Fellowship offered sanctuary. So Rosa and Rafael Chavez came and stayed with Fellowship families for a year. Then they moved on to Canada, where they received official asylum.

What are the core ideas of liberation theology? First and foremost, liberation theology begins with and primarily focuses on poor people. Why focus on the poor? Because this is what Jesus' story and message tells us to do. Over and over again, and at considerable risk, Jesus spoke out for the poor and downtrodden of his society. He declared that God is with the poor and other oppressed people. And he did so not as a well-to-do person talking about the poor, but as a poor outcast himself. The radical message of his story is that God chose to be especially present in this poor, uneducated, illegitimately born Jew living in the desperate backwaters of the Roman empire.³ This is the power of the story of Jesus' birth—here was this baby born to poor and unimportant parents in the most humble of places: a stable. And here were powerful kings or wisemen worshipping this poor little baby. It is a story of the world turned upside down. A painting of the nativity on the cover of one of the books I read for this sermon suggests this: Mary and Joseph are depicted as Latin American peasants, and the wisemen look like aristocrats. The painting—and the story—demand a radical shift in perspective. When we strip away all the layers that have been added to it over the centuries, it is an astonishing, audacious and deeply radical story. Liberation theology declares that at its heart, Jesus' message is more than anything else about the liberation of the poor and other oppressed people. And so their liberation is the great goal of liberation theology. And it's liberation in the here and now, not the in the Afterlife.⁴

All of this calls liberation theologians to declare what they commonly call a “preferential option for the poor.” What this means is that the first order of business for humanity should be not only relief for the poor, but more importantly, the destruction of social structures that create and sustain poverty. Nothing else in religion—not evangelism, not private piety, not the Afterlife—is more important than ending poverty. And so whether our actions diminish or sustain poverty must be the primary ethical question.⁵ Many liberation theologians today are expanding this understanding to encompass not just poverty, but other oppressions as well. I think this is a good move.

For liberation theologians, liberation of the oppressed is so essential to Jesus' gospel that the oppressed must be the starting point of theology and liberation. Liberation theology is therefore not about top-down solutions to poverty, but about oppressed people taking the lead in the solution.⁶

Anger is present in a lot of liberation theology. This is understandable and positive because anger is an appropriate response to the continuing scourge of poverty and other oppression. Such anger can powerfully motivate us to do something. Anger helps us—whether we are poor or not—to realize that things could be different, that there must be a better way. Anger fuels justice. Liberation theologians are careful to

³ Brown, p. 30.

⁴ Ivan Petrella, ed., *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p. xv; Brown, pp. 52, 89-91.

⁵ Brown, p. 32; German Gutierrez, “Ethic for Life and Option for the Poor,” in Petrella, p. 87.

⁶ Petrella, p. xiii.

distinguish anger from hatred; hatred does not help us do the work of justice. Hatred opens the door to violence, which is never an acceptable weapon against oppression.

Anger is not the end point of liberation theology. The key is to take the anger and use it as a spur to action. The oppression faced by so many people is so great that it demands not pious thoughts and prayers, not more talk, not half measures, not band-aids and not even reform. No, oppression demands radical change. Liberation theologians do not shy away from the “R” word—Revolution! Everything—especially the huge and growing inequity between so many of us in developed countries versus those in developing countries—needs to be upended if we are going to diminish and one day end oppression.

And so, liberation theology demands commitment, risk, courage and action. In the face of injustice, nothing less will suffice. Liberation theology is not about praying or otherwise sitting around waiting for God to do the heavy lifting against oppression. The heavy lifting is our job. And for liberation theology, the place to start is always ones own life and ones own community.

Also importantly, liberation theology demands not just action but also continued reflection. A key concept in liberation theology is *praxis*—a never-ending process of reflection, action, more reflection, and more action. Liberation theology requires this on-going dance between reflection and action.⁷

Another hallmark of liberation theology is its reliance not just on exploration of biblical themes but also on modern social science. According to liberation theology, the insights of social science can help us better identify oppression, and better identify effective strategies to fight oppression.

One important social science tool for many liberation theologians has been Marxist analysis, particularly about the nature of class struggle. Not surprisingly, this has subjected liberation theology to a great deal of criticism from the Catholic hierarchy—especially under Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict. And it has been a magnet of attack from conservative religious leaders and politicians in both North and South America. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in most of the world made the use of Marxist analysis even more problematic. As a result, liberation theologians rely less on Marxism today.⁸

An emphasis on community continues to be far more significant to liberation theology than Marxism ever was. The way to attack the world’s rampant injustice is not to go at it on one’s own, but to work with others in community. And so small communities called “base communities” lie at the heart of liberation theology in Latin America. A base community is a small group of people—maybe fifteen to thirty people—that meets on a weekly basis. In essence it is a small congregation. At the weekly meetings, members read and discuss scripture—and particularly what scripture has to say about the very concrete challenges in their lives. They sing. They pray. If a priest is part of the base community, they might celebrate the Eucharist, too. And just as important as Bible study, singing and praying, members of base communities discuss the problems they are facing in their village or city, and what they might do together to be agents of justice and change.

⁷ Brown, pp. 26-33, 57-58, 118.

⁸ Brown, pp. 45, 85, 148; Petrella, p. xiv.

In the early 1990s, there were perhaps 100,000 base communities in Latin America. As the coverage of Pope Benedict's visit to Latin America last spring revealed, a lot continue to exist. The base community is a new, radically different way of doing church. It has inspired a variety of religious groups in the United States. In our own Fellowship, we can see principles of base communities reflected in our covenant group program. More than anything, base communities remind us that we need the company of others in our spiritual journeys, and that we can't change the world on our own. We have to work on building a better world in community.⁹

A final core idea of liberation theology is hope. Even though liberation theology describes the harsh reality of oppression without blinking or turning away, the picture it presents of crushed lives is not the end of the story. The message of Jesus doesn't just help us name oppression; it also contains good news that justice can carry the day—not in some blissful afterlife but right here in the midst of our struggling and imperfect world. There is, liberation theology proclaims, the possibility that oppression can be defeated—but only if we dedicate ourselves to the creation of a better world, and then act accordingly. As Eleazar Fernandez asserts, liberation theology is not just a denunciation of injustice; it is also an annunciation of “the possibility of a new tomorrow.”¹⁰ Liberation theologians take the resurrection story seriously: even in the bleakest moment, they recognize that new life can be born. There is always reason for hope.

So why, as I indicated in the title of the sermon today, does encountering liberation theology feel like a slap in the face to me? Because it relentlessly names oppression, and then it demands radical solutions. Even more troubling, it demands radical solutions of me! Liberation theology shakes the foundations, rattles cages, and demands not just good thoughts or band-aids, but action. Now. Liberation theology is impatient with injustice.¹¹

And liberation theology connects the dots so that I realize that oppression is something that I might well be aiding and abetting through my actions. Liberation theology connects the dots—from oppression at home and abroad to the choices I make in my own life and the prosperity I enjoy. Liberation theology reminds me that the clothes I buy, the coffee I drink, the energy I consume, the gadgets I enjoy all may well come to me on the backs of oppressed people. Archbishop Romero said, “What good are beautiful highways and airports, all these beautiful skyscrapers, if they are fashioned out of the clotted blood of the poor who will never enjoy them?”¹² What good are the coffee I love and the cool clothes I wear and the gadgets I enjoy if they are fashioned out of the clotted blood of the poor who will never enjoy them? Liberation theology calls me to listen to the words of the poor (and oppressed), to let the knives of those words bury themselves in my flesh and cut, and hurt, and draw out the infection of my being part of the oppression.

Here's the unambiguous truth of liberation theology: when there is too little for some, this inevitably means that there is too much for others. The only solution is to do

⁹ Brown, pp. 71-76.

¹⁰ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle* (New York: Orbis, 1994), pp. 49-50.

¹¹ <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-3916/Martin-Luther-King-Jr>. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously talked about being “saved from patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice” in his first speech as president of the group protesting segregation in Montgomery, Alabama.

¹² Brown, p. 35.

some rearranging: those with more will need to live with less so that those with less will have more. One North American liberation theologian puts it this way: “If any child is hungry, rearrangement of the economy is called for.”¹³ I am a person who is on the “too much” side of the ledger, so liberation theology directly calls for me to make do with less. I’m like the wisemen in the nativity painting on the cover of the liberation theology book: I need to share my wealth with the poor, represented by Jesus and his parents in the painting.

So when I encounter liberation theology, I feel forced to strip away the layers of denial and rationalization. I feel called to confront my own role in the oppression of others. And then I feel forced not to wallow in self-flagellation (which though tempting is pointless); I feel forced to do something so I can work against oppression rather than aiding and abetting it. This is why encountering liberation theology always feels to me like a slap in the face. It wakes me up and tells me to get going on the work of justice, starting right here in my own life.

Liberation theology is like a “What Would Jesus Do?” bracelet, without the fluff. What would Jesus do in the face of oppression? Well, I believe he would do whatever is necessary to speak out and non-violently work against oppression. And he would do so even at the risk of his own life. Am I willing to follow Jesus and do the same? If not, then liberation theology insists that I acknowledge my participation in oppression. Contrary to the common image of casually wearing a “What Would Jesus Do?” bracelet, seriously considering the question “What Would Jesus Do?” is one of the scariest things I can think of.

So what can I do in the face of oppression? This is the real question Jesus wanted us to face. For me, then, the truly important question is really not “What Would Jesus Do?” but “What Will Roger Do?” Now this is a truly frightening question!

In the face of this question, it is easy to become overwhelmed. But here liberation theology also helps. It reminds me that the work of changing the world starts not on the international scale—where I don’t feel a lot of power—but rather in the local community in which I live. The maxim of liberation theology is to think globally and act locally. This makes the work of liberation sound a little more doable. Liberation theology also reminds me that while my personal decisions are important, I am not on my own. My work for liberation will be more effective if I work with others in a community like this Fellowship. And liberation theology reminds me that there is always hope, even in the bleakest of situations—even when one of your leaders gets crucified or shot to death on the steps in front of a cathedral or on a hotel balcony.

Liberation theology insists that we not dwell on abstractions. So in that spirit I will conclude today with a brief consideration of a tangible reminder that we don’t have to travel to Latin America to find oppression. There are lots of places here in the Fox Cities we can find oppression. Some of us here today don’t have to look further than our own lives and our own struggles to find housing or enough to eat or wear or affordable health care.

Another place we can tangibly see oppression in our midst is located on French Road in the Town of Grand Chute. It is tempting to drive by the April Aire Mobile Home Park on French Road and look the other way, at the county landfill. The landfill is a less disturbing picture. But liberation theology insists that we look at this particular

¹³ Brown, p. 84.

mobile home park, that we acknowledge the suffering of its inhabitants. The local media has powerfully documented their plight: the mobile homes they rent have become dilapidated and dangerous. The owner of the park and its homes has gone into bankruptcy. If the credit union that now owns the park simply shuts it down (as must be tempting), there will be dozens of more homeless families in our community. It's time for the community—including you and me and this fellowship—to face this problem without turning away.

Next week a task force will convene to tackle the problem. The task force will include officials from Outagamie County and the Town of Grand Chute, the credit union that now owns the property, the Community Foundation, local non-profit agencies that provide services to homeless people, local organizations that work to create affordable housing, the Post-Crescent, and local religious charities and leaders (including me). And, very importantly, it will include the residents of April Aire Mobile Home Park.

It strikes me that this task force has a powerful opportunity to embody the principles of liberation theology. If we do our work well, we will focus not just in providing relief to the April Aire residents; we will also focus on the systemic issues that cause people to live in subpar housing like April Aire or to have no home. If we do our work well, we will solve the problem not as individuals or individual organizations, but as a community. And if we are to do our work well, those of us on the task force who are not residents of April Aire will acknowledge that the residents bring wisdom to the table. The solution will not be a top-down imposition from community leaders, but in part come from the residents themselves. All of us on the task force, and all of us in our Fox Cities community, have a powerful opportunity to practice resurrection.

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