

## Proper 16 Year C 2019

For those who know me, I know y'all will find this hard to believe... but I went to seminary pretty sure that I already knew all I needed to know about Christianity. Seminary was just that hoop one had to jump through in order to become a priest. I already had a seasoned belief system: After all the church had always been a central part of my life (except in college). I was schooled in it. I grew up hearing the great stories of the bible; I learned to sing in the junior choir as a child, and then I was in the adult choir for some twenty five years. I was an acolyte, a good one; I served as senior warden in my home parish. I was active in our diocese: I served on the Standing Committee; I was treasurer; I was a deputy to General Convention. I kind of ran out of things to do as a layperson.

Theologically I was a Theist, like most of us modern western Christians. That is to say that I believed in an all-powerful, all-knowing God, mysteriously residing in the heavens... and that God entered history in the form of a human, his Son Jesus, who was sacrificed for our sins, thereby assuring all of us who believed eternal life; that we would go to heaven after we died... and in the Episcopal church we were taught that at our baptisms, we were saved once and for all... When all the 'teens for Christ' in the sixties and seventies were running around school asking if we were saved.... I went home and asked my mother if I was

saved... and she said, "of course you are... you don't have to worry about that; you're an Episcopalian."

So religion for me was a way to think about the state of my soul... that I was loved by God, and that God would take care of me. I was like most of us, conditioned like most of us... to think that faith was personal... that faith had to do with me... a lot like life... Life, after all, is about me. We are taught that are we not? Sometimes overtly, sometimes subliminally. We are taught, by the culture, by the media, even by our families, that we are to pursue happiness and success and security and self-reliance; that we can, by the grace of God, achieve anything we put our minds to... and God is right along with us, blessing us... seeing that our blessings proceed according to plan. It was a white privileged religion... Not that I ever have been a fundamentalist. I've always known that scripture is in many cases metaphorical; not literal. I've always appreciated the mythic proportions of the faith; the philosophical underpinnings of religion; the psychology of it... but quite unexpectedly that all got challenged in seminary. My entire world view was up for review; all was questionable... perhaps I didn't know as much as I thought.

Unlike most of the Episcopal seminaries, and mainstream denominational seminaries, seminaries that hold to the tradition of theism, the Seminary of the

Southwest teaches liberation theology. Liberation theology in its modern manifestation emerged in South and Latin America in the 1940's and 50's. Many of these countries had suffered the exploitation of capitalist Europe, and the United States. Industries and agriculture from Western Europe and the United States had in effect colonized Latin and South America reaping formidable profits while leaving the countries as poor, or poorer than they were before their colonization. The liberation theologians, speaking from their social and economic context, argued that the capitalist powers of the western northern hemisphere were, in truth, the new Empire against which oppressed and exploited people must stand. That God is first and foremost about the freedom of God's people from the oppression that greed engenders. This wasn't just a convenient fad... but the result of rich and rigorous scholarship that found in Hebrew scripture, and New Testament literature the recurring theme of liberation, the Exodus from Egypt the touchstone; the transformation from the shame that poverty brings, to the dignity of freedom, well-being, and self-determination.

I found myself enthralled with this theology, which I came to understand was nothing 'new' but both ancient and orthodox. I read insatiably Gutierrez; and Leonardo Boff; and Jose Comblin, Catholic writers that in no small way tested the Vatican's theistic teachings... They wrote that God was first and foremost in

solidarity with the poor and marginalized, the so-called non-persons (their coinage) of our world; and that they were the focus of salvation; they were the ones to whom the good news of the Gospels was intended first....The Vatican bristled of course; their South and Latin American flock were becoming activists....in fact Leonardo Boff was excommunicated. And there was another important awareness embraced by these theologians... and that was a new way to speak of sin....It was the concept of sin being structural....I was always taught to believe that sin was about me... my bad choices, my falling short; even my private thoughts... but for the liberation theologians sin is structural, that is, it is embedded in society, institutionalized in the power structure.... Sin has everything to do with power.... And that power corrupts... and that the powerful create a structural advantage in society... in other words when the institutional structures of society favor the powerful at the expense of the weak and the least powerful, then that is sin....And sin embeds itself in the status quo; and it's hard to root it out... So it follows to say, for example, that the prison system in this country that incarcerates disproportionately people of color... is sinful; Our immigration system, or lack thereof, which terrorizes families seeking a dignified life... is sinful... The fact that women make 70 cents on the dollar doing the same work as men... that is sin; Climate change is fueled by the profit motive, compromising our

very viability on this planet... that is sin.... Wherever there is imbalance in the power dynamic in our institutions... that is what sin is by its most ancient definition. So if salvation is about overcoming sin and the destruction sin brings, then salvation is about a change in the social and economic order that brings freedom and dignity. So these days my operative definition of sin is this: 'collective indignity'. Sin is much less personal, than it is societal. Sin ruins the life of society, and salvation is the mission of the faithful to challenge sin through the power of Love, and thereby restoring society to its true humanity. Theism is the theology of the privileged; the theology of the status quo. Liberation is the theology that speaks of change and transformation, recognizing that God's Spirit is all about change and transformation. It was the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr., of Nelson Mandela; of Cesar Chavez; of Dorothy Day.

So that's a Reader's Digest lesson on Liberation theology... And I want to say that unlike traditional theism, that has God aloof in the heavens; liberation theology speaks of God in solidarity with those who suffer in creation. That God's project in earth is the freedom from oppression for God's people... and it is the church, the faithful, the very body of Christ who bear God's life... God's life active and activist in the world. Theism speaks of a God who is distant and other; it is

easy; and it is safe... Liberation theology speaks of a God active and engaged with the world.

So I think this passage from Luke today can only be understood in the context of liberation. Remember, Mary's song informs the action of this Gospel... She speaks of the liberation of her people from indignity...the poor are raised up and filled with good things... the arrogant are routed... the worldly rulers are deposed.... The status quo is turned upside down... the elite are sent away and the shamed are given dignity... Mary is speaking of God's people, the shamed people of Israel at the hands of empire.... And here in our reading today, another woman, like Mary in her humiliation is raised up, enabled to stand with dignity...Alas, the synagogue president is in league with the status quo, the structure of hierarchy, and questions Jesus' liberating act... Sin has found its way into the synagogue itself. It has found a structure in which to hide.

The point of this story is that Jesus is here on this earth to help the broken and the shamed stand with dignity. The Greek word for 'standing with dignity' is the same word for resurrection... Jesus came to liberate God's people from the burden of humiliation and non-personhood. That is his mission... that is God's mission.... And brothers and sisters that is our mission. We are to help people to

stand so that they may be given the privilege of simply being grateful... perhaps the tragic flaw of modernity is ingratitude... The climax of this story is that the woman stands and simply praises God... when all is said and done in this life that is all that is left worth having... the freedom and the privilege to praise God for the beauty of life... That is what Love does... Love only wants the freedom, and the joy that comes with it, for the other. Love exults in the well-being of a brother, of a sister.... Love exults when one who is broken is enabled to stand.

The way of Jesus is not a belief system... It is not about thinking the right way. It is not privileged knowledge.... the way of Jesus is to attend to the dignity of our neighbor... and in particular, our neighbor worn down by the sin of the world. We celebrate that vocation Sunday after Sunday amid our prayers and our praise. There is nothing more meet and right... nothing more noble, than to raise up the wounded among us, the ones crippled by the collective indignity so rampant in our world.

Perhaps the most meaningful moment in our liturgy is when we leave the building.... We leave having been reminded that we are nourished by the Love of God, and we take that Love into the streets to, as Isaiah puts it, unbind the broken-hearted; to release the captives, to proclaim the year of God's favor.... To

be repairers of the breach; to restore the streets to live in... That, brothers and sisters, is our life's work... all we need is the will.... And perhaps a little courage. Perhaps that is our most important thing for which to ask God... When you say your prayers... ask for courage. The courage to Love as God loves. The courage to liberate. The courage to be.