

Liberation and Hope

Mark 1: 21-28

*Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 2nd February 2003/
Sacrament of Holy Communion*

When I was a student at Rutgers College in New Brunswick, New Jersey, I took a course offered by the religion department: Religion & Politics. Growing up within the church I assumed that religion and politics had nothing in common and therefore was intrigued by the title. My professor, Hiroshi Obayashi, led us through the writings of secular theorists, including Karl Marx (1818-1883) and theologians such as the American, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. It was in that class, long before I went to seminary or had any interest in seminary, that I came to know about liberation theology.

Liberation theology started to emerge in the 1960s in Central and South Americas, influenced by the German Reformed theologian, Jürgen Moltmann's classic text, *Theology of Hope*.¹ The basic premise of liberation theology is that God's good news in Jesus Christ is not simply realized when we have "shuffled off this mortal coil"² and crossed the threshold of the pearly gates. The promises of the gospel, this good news that revolutionized the first century still has the capacity to revolutionize our world - *now*.

At the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ are two major themes. At the center of the Christian experience are two fundamental realizations. They are *liberation* and *hope*. The encounter with the risen Christ has the capacity to offer liberation and extend a vision of hope. This liberation and hope are experienced not in the great by-and-by, but here and now. "Now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:2)" *Today!* The Spirit's gift of freedom can be experienced here, in life now - through political struggles against all forces that seek to oppress and dehumanize. The Spirit's gift of hope can be experienced here, in life now - by holding up a vision for the oppressed that life can be different. And what is more, God is on the side of the oppressed.

Liberation theologians have come to see, especially through the Song of Mary in Luke 1, the Magnificat, that the God of Abraham is on the side of the weak and lowly. For "God has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. (Luke 1: 51-53)" This is why religion and politics need to connect - because the power of God is at work in the world to bring justice, to bring freedom, to be bring hope to all those who are enslaved and oppressed. Jesus not only preached liberation and offered hope, he was the *means* of liberation and the source of hope - as in Mark's account of this healing in the first chapter of the gospel.

¹Full title: *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*(1967).

²William Shakespeare (1564-1616), *Hamlet* (V.i)

I've been thinking a lot about liberation theology over the last week or so after traveling to Guatemala. It's one thing to read about churches which are grounded in liberation theology. It's quite another to worship with and talk with women and men who are actually participating in the struggle, being extraordinary witnesses to the power of Christ at work in the world today, who are walking the walk. As I shared last week, these two words, liberation and hope, surfaced all over the place. These Mayan-Presbyterians have witnessed firsthand the power of God to bring release and offer a future. The liberating power of the Gospel is amazingly real for them.

But I've also done a lot of thinking about something else. If the gospel of Christ is liberating for our Mayan sisters and brothers in Central America, then the gospel of Christ must also be liberating for us in North America. We often enter developing countries thinking we in the North or the West have all the answers to their problems. "They just need Jesus. Jesus will make their life better," we might say. *But what about us? Or to put it another way: What does liberation theology have to say to us in North America in 2003? What does it have to say to us at Catonsville Presbyterian? What does liberation look like for us?*

Let me push it further. While we might not be possessed by "unclean spirits (Mark 1:23)," (although we might), this doesn't mean we're not in need of healing. While we might think of ourselves as citizens of the land of the free and the home of the brave, are we really all that free and are we really all that brave? In other words: *Where are we enslaved as North Americans? Where do we need to experience the liberation of Christ in our lives? Or, to put it another way: Where are you being oppressed? What would liberation look like for you?*

I can't answer these questions for you; but I can say, quoting Paul: "For freedom, Christ has set us free.(Galations 5: 1)" For freedom, Christ endured the agony of calvary, to make us free, to free us *from* the power of sin that seeks to destroy, disfigure, and dehumanize. Yet, calvary accomplished something else for us: the ability to live *for* freedom, for you and me to know the glorious liberty that is offered and promised to the children of God (Romans 8:21).

About a week ago in Guatemala, as we were getting ready to return to the States, I led a reflection one evening where I raised these same questions. Let me tell you, it generated a considerable amount of passion. But it also raised a considerable amount of confusion, because some people had a difficult time seeing themselves oppressed as Americans.

However, it became clear that most of us, like our Guatemalan friends, are enslaved by *fear*. I see and feel fear everywhere.

We're afraid of the future and afraid of the past.

We're fearful that the stock market won't rally in time for us to enjoy retirement.

We're fearful over the prospects of war.

We're fearful for our children and the world that we have created for them.

Our fear has oppressed us.

We're oppressed by our wealth that allows us so much luxury and pleasure, but places exceedingly great demands upon us to achieve and accumulate and maintain more and more and more.

We're oppressed by our sense of isolation, cut off from the rest of the world and not really sure why so many in the world hate us the way they do.

And some are afraid of God,
afraid to believe and afraid to doubt,
afraid to follow our *passions*
and go where the Spirit is leading and prompting us to go.

Some of the clergy last week even talked about the oppression of the pulpit, when clergy are forced to be less than passionate or less than forthright in their proclamation of the gospel and its implications for our life because they are afraid of what their congregations might think. This is particularly true with the impending war with Iraq. The church has a voice that most of the nation, and some in the church, doesn't want to hear. Yet, we are compelled to preach. Everywhere, I see and feel that we are oppressed by fear.

As we approach the Lord's Table this morning, maybe we can think of this sanctuary, this worship space as the *No Fear Zone* and this table as the place of liberation and hope. Not only does Jesus promise to be with us, but his presence offers us something we could never achieve on our own: *freedom*.

Only Christ has the power to undo the chains that bind you.

Only Christ has the power to release us from fear and trepidation.

Only Christ has the power to liberate us from whatever it is
that hinders us from being who we are meant to be.

You know where you're trapped. Or maybe you don't.

Either way –

Christ is the way out and the way through because he is our liberation and our hope.

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