

Words. There are words we don't want to say like Cancer. Dying. Dead. Racism. Sexism. There are others. To say them is to give them life....to name a reality. Even words like Love.

Lessons this week are full of provocative words. In Jeremiah...evil. In Luke...hate. Philemon is dealing with slavery. The slave turned son's name is in itself a play on words. Onesimus means 'useful.'

This portion of our worship service from the opening to the Peace, is called the Liturgy of the Word. We exchange words of blessing, hear the words of scripture, recite together words crafted centuries ago in an effort to articulate the mystery of our belief in God. The Council of Nicaea, where our Nicene Creed gets its name, was in itself an attempt by the Roman Emperor Constantine to find words to unite Christians throughout the Roman Empire. And, in the opening of our Gospel of John: In beginning was the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1)



My real text for today is the sentence on the church sign outside. "LIBERATION THEOLOGY PRACTICED HERE." The messages on our sign are intended to draw attention, to provoke reflection, to reveal the heart of Christ as we have received it, reaching out to the downtown community.

The term liberation theology has both general and specific meaning and can vary according to social locations. In some media circles recently, the term 'liberation theology' has been used provoking some strong reactions. I'm going to do my best to present a background from classic Christianity in the hope that we may all be better informed. Words have power to provoke, to calm, to divide, to proclaim and to gather.

For background, I'm going to lean heavily from the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, a well-respected standard reference in the Church. In addition, our Prayer Book contains a section in the back called 'An Outline of the Faith, commonly called the Catechism.' The rubrics-those instructions in italics throughout- (*BCP*, 844), describe the catechism as "a point of departure for the teacher...in a traditional question and answer form." Putting these two together, if there were to be a section added to the catechism on Liberation Theology, it might go something like this:

- Q. What is theology?
- A. The study or science of God.

Q. Why study God?

A. The study of God is part of our response of love for God as contained in Great Commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” As Christians, it is our task to have the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2:5)

Q. Why do we need different theologies?

A. Because despite our strivings to love God and to put on the mind of Christ, we are lesser than God, separate from God, and experience God in the world differently. Our social locations of race, gender, ethnicity, class, age, able-bodiedness, immigration status, and sexual orientation, to name a few, influence our experience of God. Different theologies enable us to describe our own experience, to stand in solidarity with our neighbor, to the end that we come to know and respond to God more fully in our love of our neighbor.

Q. What are theologies of liberation, in general?

A. Theologies of liberation use the lens of freedom to understand God, Christ, and experience of God in human history. The biblical foundations are found primarily in the Exodus when the Hebrew slaves were released from captivity in Egypt and loved into a people known as Israel; and, in Jesus Christ as the one to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives and to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4:18) “Liberation theology is not formed in a vacuum. It came forth as the longing of an oppressed people to have meaning in the midst of being treated meaninglessly.” (Kwok, 316) Most familiar may be feminist liberation theology and black liberation theology.

Q. What is Liberation Theology, capitalized?

A. Liberation Theology is also is the name given to a worldwide theological movement that came to prominence in the late 60s in the Roman Church in South and Latin America. It is marked by a preferential option for the poor, an understanding that salvation is concerned with the whole person and not just spiritual needs, and emphasizes Christ’s confrontation with unjust social structures. Right belief (orthodoxy) issues only from right action (orthopraxis.) A practical expression has been in the growth in South America of small base communities led by lay men and women who try to integrate spiritual and social values. (*ODCC*, 983-4)

Q. What about our human condition?

A. Despite Jesus’ proclamation of the year of the Lord’s favor and that the Kingdom of God was at hand, people have continued to be oppressed and unable to flourish as God intends. Political, economic, social, and ecclesial structures still exist that coercively assert power over others in ways that are no less diminishing and no less violent than the actual physical use of force. Our own sin becomes interlocked with the sins of others.

Q. What about sin and redemption?

A. We all lose our liberty when our neighbor is not free. Our relationship with God continues to be distorted. We are only truly free from the power of sin, when the redemptive love of God brings harmony within our lives, our neighbors, our relationships, our institutions, our cultures, and all of Creation. The love and justice of God is in-

tended to flow through our lives here and now throughout all Creation and not just after we die.

Q. How do we practice liberation theology?

A. We practice liberation theology in our ministry to the poor, not just to meet their immediate needs for food, shelter, meaningful work and wholeness but by aligning our systems and powers with the same love and justice of God. We practice liberation theology when we realize that the year of the Lord's favor is here and now and is to be proclaimed by our actions throughout the entire, inter-related web of our relationships.

I'm going to stop there, as far as this attempt at a catechism is concerned. My hope is that it may be a point of departure for reflection and discussion. We must "seek to do what the best theology, from Paul addressing the church at Corinth to Karl Barth denouncing the Nazis, has always done: make Christianity address the particular problems of their societies." (Placher, 306)

As far as the 'practiced here' part of our sign message is concerned, what do you see here, at 20 West First Street, and beyond this physical location as the people of Christ Church endeavoring to live lives sharing Christ's love in the Miami Valley? There's a lot going on. People work diligently as teachers, as advocates for effective education; as health care providers and advocates for health insurance reform, as peace activists, writers, and people of prayer, to name a few. And there are even more striving to live godly lives while in captivity, their freedom constrained by invisible walls. Liberation theology is practiced here.

Moses cried to Pharaoh to let the people go a long time ago, yet, as a theological discipline, liberation has only come unto its own in the last generation. Being new, many are skeptical, especially if closely held beliefs are challenged. In 1983, theological historian William Placher (as main stream as you can get) wrote:

[I]t has always been a central part of the Christian hope that a divided world might someday learn that all are one in Christ. Liberation theologies will certainly play an important part in the theology of the coming decades—always assuming that nuclear holocaust does not bring us back to apocalypticism with a vengeance. Blacks in the United States and women and others, after all, share with the liberation theologians of the third world a conviction as old as Luther, or Paul, or Moses' cries to Pharaoh—that theology ought to make a difference in people's lives, helping those suffering and in need. (Placher, 311-312)

Finally, let there be peace among us, and let us not be instruments of our own or other's oppression. Amen.

The Book of Common Prayer 1979. New York: Church Publishing, 1979.

Kwok Pui-lan, Don H Compier, Joerg Rieger, eds. *Empire in the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, Fortress Press, 2007.

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