

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Finding Truth and Meaning on the Margins”
 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore September 16, 2018

Sermon

I was a little shocked by the title of the book. As part of Eileen Casey-Campbell’s internship with us last year, I had a weekly supervision meeting with her. Though I don’t remember the context of our conversation, what I do remember *very clearly* was Eileen getting a very serious expression on her face, Googling something on her phone then showing the screen to me. On it was the cover of a book by the Basque priest Fr. Jon Sobrino who works in El Salvador titled, “No Salvation Outside the Poor.” When she read it in seminary, it made a big impression on her. She thought it would be a good book for me too.

The title certainly made a big impression on me. Being raised a secular humanist, I’d never worried much about my salvation since I didn’t think there was such a thing. But now that I’m in the ministry, the word salvation has a much richer, more metaphorical meaning. I’m a skeptic of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic conceptions of heaven and hell. The meaning I DO find in salvation comes from interpreting the word socially and ethically. For the growth and development of a peaceful and just society, we cannot do it without resolving systemic injustices that drive poverty.

Holding the value that society needs to address poverty lacks the intensive punch of saying NO salvation outside the poor. Yeah, when I was in seminar I thought, poverty is important but not as important as more lofty philosophical and theological topics. I studied topics like, building a systematic theology, the difference in Process Theology between pantheism and pan-entheism, and the Protestant controversy of justification by faith or works. And as a person very committed to Buddhist meditation techniques, I focused more the direct personal experience of how my mind worked (that would help liberate me from suffering) than my relationship with the poor.

Eileen planted a seed in me ... to find out more.

So I’ve been exploring the sources of that book title. “No Salvation Outside the Poor,” is a play on a familiar Catholic expression, “No salvation outside the Church.” It arises from a movement in Catholicism that began in Central and South America in the 1960’s called Liberation Theology. It got it’s name from a book published in 1973 titled “A Theology of Liberation” by Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a priest who pastors in the slums of Lima, Peru.

The great suffering of the poor in the developing world, while a tiny elite prosper enabled and at times directed by colonial powers like the United States, was elevated by the Second Vatican Council. Before this the church often collaborated with that elite. But some radicalized bishops gathered in Columbia in the late 1960’s to make a declaration that this status quo was wrong and needed to be changed. This gathering encouraged Gutiérrez to write his book that electrified the poor of Central and South America.

Liberation Theology reads the ministry of Jesus differently than the Apostle Paul did. Paul didn’t pay much attention to what Jesus said and did in his life. Paul, and the church that was built by him, cared first and foremost that Jesus died for our sins, was resurrected, and could save us and get us into heaven. Gutierrez is much more interested in the message Jesus had specifically to the poor. Because if Jesus IS God on earth and we want to know WHO God is, then we need to pay close attention to what Jesus says and does. When we read Luke 4:18-19, we get a capsule description of what God is and wants to do:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of Jubilee.”

Not much in that quote from the Prophet Isaiah about getting people into heaven and a lot about social justice. Uplift the poor, free prisoners, set the oppressed free, and finally canceling debts so people can get a fresh start. Jesus tells the Good Samaritan story as a response to the question who is my neighbor. Samaritans were the marginalized of the marginalized, rejected by the Jewish community.

Liberation theologian Paulo Freire, interprets Jesus as God being on the side of the poor in the phrase, “the preferential option for the poor.” If we want to follow the guidance of Jesus, we’ll need to also be willing to bring good news to the poor and free the oppressed.

As I was researching and reading about Liberation Theology, I noticed references to a parallel movement that was happening at the same time called Black Theology. The prominent name mentioned was Dr. James Cone.

Dr. Cone’s interest in Black theology developed watching the 1967 riots in Detroit on TV while he was in seminary. In the Black radical movement, Black power was countering Dr. King’s vision of non-violence. Cone was trying to put all this together with the contemporary white theologians like Barth and Tillich he was reading. His breakthrough was to read the Gospels as the story of a Black Jesus. And if Jesus was Black, then God was Black too. The Gospels were telling the story of the liberation of Black people from oppression. That is what God was trying to do in Jesus. That is what the Holy Spirit as God’s agent in the world today continues to do. Black power is fueled through Jesus’ mission of liberation of **God’s** Black people.

This isn’t the meek, mild, suffering servant Jesus dished up in most Christian churches including many Black churches. This saintly lamb led to slaughter who carries a Centurion’s pack an extra mile and turns the other cheek isn’t political at all. Paul says, don’t worry about this world and be a good slave. Your reward will be in heaven. The tension between this worldly activity and preparation for eternal life in churches mostly focuses on the latter not the former. Cone proclaims a Jesus ready to storm the barricades for his people and tear them down. Jesus came to bring heaven to earth not escape earth for heaven.

Well these were radical ideas back in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first they still haven’t taken off. Cardinal Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict, didn’t like Liberation Theology because it deviated too far from the orthodoxy he defended. The opening of the middle class to Blacks during the 1980’s and 1990’s cooled the Black Power movement as leaders and potential leaders had a taste of affluence.

And Black churches tend to be very conservative – oriented to keeping their members alive and out of trouble with the white establishment rather than risking confrontation and getting their church burned down. We saw what happened when Rev. Jeremiah Wright used some Black Theology power language saying “God Damn America.” It almost cost Obama a shot at the Presidency. Tame language compared to what you’ll read in Cone’s books.

And Cone doesn’t address the issues of gender identity and sexual orientation that are core to the Black Lives Matter movement led by Queer Black women. These women are not at home in very patriarchal churches and not looking to church pastors for guidance.

Whether or not Liberation and Black Theology have become popular, they still arise out of what I find a powerful Biblical analysis that resonates with Unitarian and Universalist Christianity. Jesus's Prophetic calling to liberate the poor and oppressed easily gets lost in churches focused on the prosperity gospel. Believe in Jesus and get rich. Seems to me there was a story about camels and eyes of needles having to do with the rich that is getting forgotten. If you don't know it ... look it up!

Yet here is the rub for those of us here identified as white and middle-class. Where do we fit into Liberation and Black Theology? Is there a place for us in this picture? If God is Black, she may not be very pleased with us nor our participation in white supremacy culture.

Jesus does have an answer for us I think when he talks about separating the sheep from the goats. Hear this strong unequivocal language in Matthew chapter 25:

"Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will tell those on his right hand, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?'

"The King will answer them, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.' Then he will say also to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, ... for I was hungry, and you didn't give me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you didn't take me in; naked, and you didn't clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

"Then they will also answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn't help you?'

"Then he will answer them, saying, 'Most certainly I tell you, because you didn't do it to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.'

I'm not going to ask for hands about who identifies more with the sheep or the goats. I know I could easily be in the goat category, though I've also been with the sheep at times too.

I'd like to highlight three ways to respond. They all come from the spirit of what Jesus is saying. It is all about witnessing suffering and responding with action to relieve it.

The first guidance comes from Bryan Stevenson, the activist lawyer fighting to save people from being unjustly executed as part of the Equal Justice Initiative. He spoke at our Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly last year in New Orleans delivering the Ware Lecture. In it he advised us that one thing we could do that would transform us was getting proximate to the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. Observing from a distance can be educational, but until you directly encounter the reality of poverty and oppression you will not be changed. And in the process, he encouraged us, be willing to be uncomfortable.

The second guide is Dr. Paul Farmer, who leads the worldwide organization Partners in Health that offers direct high quality medical care to the poorest people in the world. Farmer's work was inspired by reading Gutiérrez's book while working in Haiti and studying in medical school. In it he found the guidance for how to do the work with the poor he felt moved to do. Key for him in that work is building egalitarian

relationships that helped doctors open their hearts to the people they worked with. For transformation to happen, people have to love each other. Love only happens when people meet in the heart.

The third guide is this year's Ware Lecturer, Black Lives Matter organizer, activist, and blogger, Brittany Packnett. Her whole talk revolved around the word "expectation." She powerfully works with that word to show us what we need to do. We need to listen to our partners in marginalized communities for their expectations and then strive to meet or exceed them, the same way we might with our boss at work. When we are willing to move to *that* level of commitment, transformation can happen for everyone.

Let me emphasize that this is important. We've got to figure this out. We can't save this planet from ecological destruction without world-wide cooperation from the richest to the poorest people. And there are many, many more poor people than there are rich. The wealthy of the world, and we are the wealthy of the world my friends, will never free ourselves from fear without transforming our relationship with the poor and oppressed. We'll never have peace for our children and their children without justice for all.

May we accept the challenge of the poor and oppressed and follow Jesus' example.