

Liberation Theology: Creating a Way

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU Ellicott City, MD January 31, 2021

My husband and I often seek out historic churches and cathedrals. The windows, no longer simply a connection between the inside world and that without, now filled with translucent colors crafted in ways to create intricate scenes and symbols. Sometimes a steeple jutting into the sky above, or a bell ready to toll. The inside is often quiet and met with reverence, pews or chairs in line, waiting for worshippers to arrive. The pulpit up front, draped with fabrics; Perhaps an organ in the corner. In these spaces we often find some sort of connection with the holy; that seems a place to seek it out. But I wonder, is the holy perhaps not only found in these intricacies but perhaps somewhere else – somewhere more human? Perhaps, more accessible, and, as such, all the more powerful? I wonder about finding the holy amongst the downtrodden. In soup kitchens. In women's shelters. In folks grappling with how to simply get by. In those trying to create a way when no way seems possible. Is not the holy there?

The fourth of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles is the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. What is powerful about our faith is that we are encouraged to grapple with theology – to pull from different sources as we work to make sense of the world around us – to use theology as a way to find meaning, to be provided sustenance, to guide our lives and give us purpose. The free and responsible search for truth and meaning – a call to engage with our imaginations. We each gain spiritual depth from engaging with the theology of others – today we draw from the Christian roots of our faith.

Today we engage with those who do not find the holy in the ornate but instead who find the holy in the suffering. In the marginalized. Today we learn about Liberation Theology – a theology with Christian roots, created by those suffering from oppression. Partnered with this is Womanist theology – a form of liberation theology tailored specifically to black women. We garner wisdom from those who were presented with Christianity and used their imaginations to create a Christian theology that made sense to their own unique circumstances – finding meaning, sustenance, and strength. As we explore this theology we use the terminology of those who share these beliefs – we talk about the holy as seen as God and Jesus. We explore how to re-imagine the figure of Jesus and grapple with a re-imagined God. This is a theology shared by some groups of people who live lives on the margins.

Maya Angelou writes of a bird that “stalks down his narrow cage,” wings clipped and feet tied; a bird fearful, a bird longing. A bird standing on a grave of dreams.¹ A bird in stark juxtaposition to that which is free! We see in this caged bird those who are marginalized – the oppressed – trapped within bars forced on them by society. And yet the caged bird sings of freedom. Freedom is many things. And one of those things is an ability to make sense of the world, to find meaning, no matter how oppressed. Womanist theologian Monica Coleman writes how that bird finds a way when no way seems possible.

To Monica Coleman, creating this seemingly non-existent path acknowledges God’s presence – her belief in God’s sacred ability to provide new, novel options never available in the past. Making a way out of no way – creating a sustained and meaningful life amidst the pain, comes from a source – a source of possibility. To Coleman, this source of possibility is God. To Coleman, making this new way culminates when God presents “unforeseen possibilities,” when people are encouraged to act through

¹ *Caged Bird* Maya Angelou

human agency, when people actively work towards that goal of justice, actively work towards survival, towards a better quality of life, when we purposefully, and with our own holy guiding us, “challenge the existing order.” That is a way to make a way when nothing seems possible. This is a way established by women facing intersections of oppression – being female, black, and, at times, also poor. With the source of their holy and novel options presented, liberation becomes possible.²

Liberation theology, at its core, finds God in the oppressed; finds God in solidarity with the oppressed. Liberation theology expresses the idea that God has a preference for the poor. That God is not only found within those windows interlaid with stained glass, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the unhoused in the streets or those struggling to find food or those immersed in addiction. Not only God but also Jesus – the understanding that Jesus preferred the poor – that his message was meant for the marginalized. That he dedicated his life to them. Liberation theologians tell us that we need to do the same. That one needs to express faith by combating poverty – by combating oppression.³ Is this not embedded in our own beliefs as Unitarian Universalists? Are we not called as a faith struggling towards justice? To bend the bars of that cage, releasing that oppressed music of the trapped songbird?

Liberation theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff refer to the book of Exodus when they make their claim that God is especially close to the oppressed; that God “hears their cry and lets them free.” They continue with their understanding of God as the parent of all, but primarily the parent and “defender of those who are oppressed and treated unjustly.” Those are who the holy tends to with great care. Those

² *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* Monica A. Coleman pgs. 33-34

³ *Introducing Liberation Theology* Leonard Boff, Clodovis Boff pgs. 44-45

are who the holy demonstrates deep and true love. Not only does this provide life but it is a call for justice – a call that life and justice should be guaranteed to all – driven by the divine love of the holy.⁴

Liberation theologian James H. Cone calls on us to re-imagine Jesus – who to Cone was divine. He calls us to re-imagine Christian faith as a faith that emerged from the crucifixion; a faith that is not one of the elite but a faith of the abused and the neglected – a faith of those who are suffering. That Christianity, seen through the lens of liberation theology, gives the oppressed the strength and courage to keep going against all odds. God and Jesus are with the oppressed, calling for justice.⁵ Leading to freedom – letting that caged bird sing.

Cone writes that Jesus and oppressed American blacks are one in the same; that there is this direct relationship between Jesus and the black men Cone writes about. Both were laborers. Both were ostracized from society. Black people were murdered and Jesus was crucified. Cone wrote that if Jesus were to come to America, he would be found with the working people. With black, indigenous, people of color. He would eat with the oppressed and he would pray with the oppressed. He would not be where I stood in those elaborate cathedrals, steeples reaching to the sky – he would be on a city sidewalk; hunched on the ground with not much more than a sleeping bag. This idea that Jesus suffered in a similar way to black Americans – for Jesus did suffer – this gave folks faith that God was there, with them, in their struggles with oppression and survival.⁶ Theologian Paul Tillich calls this “the courage to be.”⁷ Monica Coleman calls this “making a way out of no way.”⁸ James Cones says this provides folks the

⁴ *Introducing Liberation Theology* Leonard Boff, Clodovis Boff 51

⁵ *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* James H. Cone pg. 160

⁶ Ibid 21-22

⁷ *Introducing Liberation Theology* Leonard Boff, Clodovis Boff pg. 160

⁸ *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* Monica A. Coleman

strength to “keep on keeping on.”⁹ Cone writes, “humanity’s salvation is available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.”¹⁰

God as on the side of the oppressed. Jesus and black people living parallel lives sometimes converging in parallel fates. I wonder of the holy in George Floyd. In Breonna Taylor. In Ahmaud Arbery. In all those folks who took to the streets. If the holy has been in Washington DC, it would have been during those Black Lives Matter protests. Those streets filled with throngs of peaceful protestors, chanting in unison “Say his name!” These connections give folks the strength to persevere. To keep on keeping on. Strength that folks of any identity can draw from. Making a way when no way seems possible – we can all do that. We can all connect with our holy, whatever that may be, and find a way to keep going no matter what. In that sacred interdependent web, within those intricate, delicate strands that tie us all together, what affects one of us affects all. It reverberates throughout. Let this be a call to love and justice simultaneously.

We are called by liberation and womanist theologians alike to transform the world by imitating Jesus – clasping hands in prayer with the downtrodden, sharing meals with those on the outskirts of society. As liberation theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff write, this place of justice, this place of love, this place of healing – this is not a hoped for or a longed for future, but something that is made concrete in the here and now. To these theologians, they saw this in Jesus’ actions.¹¹ This ideal place is already being made – and we are the ones responsible for these liberating actions! For justice. What actions can we imitate? Liberation theologians believe that we should each do what Jesus demonstrated: he loved and shared bread with those who were suffering and in doing so he healed them. He treated the least of

⁹ *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* James H. Cone pg. 160

¹⁰ Ibid 160

¹¹ *Introducing Liberation Theology* Leonard Boff, Clodovis Boff pg. 54

these with kindness and respect and in doing so forever altered lives. His goodness and his morals called him to the least of these – to living with and helping those on the margins. And we are called to do the same. We are called to see our holy – whatever that may be – not only within the elaborate, painted walls of a cathedral or hovering in the mist that escapes a waterfall – but in those scenes of suffering; of hardship; of a fight for survival. This is where we are called to see our holy. And if we connect deeply with any marginalized group and see the holy in that group there is no way to move forward without a call to justice – to work to create good in the world. Our fate lies in how we interact with the least of these; in how we actively work to create good in the world around us. By seeing the holy in those who are living in poverty or immigrants coming to this country simply to survive and make a better life for themselves and their children or those who suffer from addiction or those who face violence. The holy is there with them, and in this makes the suffering, the poor, the most sacred among us. How will we treat the sacred? How will we actively work to better the world around us? How do we live lives of profound love – just as liberation theologians call us to do.

Maya Angelou writes, “a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams.” “His wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.” “The caged bird sings of freedom.”¹² Freedom in the sense we have explored today comes from faith – comes from this understanding that God is with the oppressed and Jesus struggled just like the oppressed did and do. This offers strength and courage and freedom for many people who are oppressed.

I invite us all to re-imagine where we find our holy, just like liberation theologians re-imagined theirs. We don’t need to believe in this Christian understanding of God or in the divinity of Jesus in order to find the sacred in the marginalized; In order to find the holy in those who are suffering. When I

¹² *Caged Bird* Maya Angelou

served as a chaplain I looked in the eyes of the suffering – of the struggling. Those facing immediate loss, hovering over a hospital bed; those facing illness, attached to IVs. And as a Unitarian Universalist, I can say I saw my holy there. In their persistence to keep going, their strength to endure, the love that still shown. Let this understanding dictate how we live our lives and operate in the world around us – how can our days change if we see our holy in those who are struggling? To see those in pain as the most sacred among us. To not only stand in awe when contemplating the holy in the beauty of a bubbling stream or the sound of classic jazz, but also deep in the eyes of those who are suffering. To see the holy on the city streets, in line at a soup kitchen, or huddled in the corner of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. That is where the holy is. Let this re-imagined faith dictate how we move forward and interact with the world – with all of those around us – all of those around us. As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to act in love. We are called to act in faith. We are called to act for justice. This day, and every day.

May it be so, and Amen