

Favela
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The first liberation theologian wasn't a Catholic priest in El Salvador in the 1960's. She wasn't a 2nd wave feminist Methodist pastor or an American Baptist African-American leader in the Civil Rights Movement. The first liberation theologian wasn't a prominent Unitarian or Quaker Abolitionist, or an early Protestant critic of graft in the Catholic Church in the 16th century. The first liberation theologian wasn't even one of the early church fathers who set up a communal living community with shared property in the desert in the 5th century or even the carpenter's son from Nazareth, preaching - scandal of scandals - that God loves the poor, or that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. The first liberation theologians weren't Amos or Isaiah or one of the other Hebrew prophets, who called down God's judgment on the nation for every orphan neglected, for every widow forgotten, and for every immigrant excluded. No, those were all liberation theologians, but they were not the first.

The first liberation theologian was someone - name unknown, place unsure, even ritual practice a mystery to us - someone who saw the world, who saw that some had plenty and some struggled, that this was not an accident but on purpose, and who said, are we not all children of the Lord?

Are we not all people of the stars?

Are we not one tribe?

How can some take from others, and call it just?

The first liberation theologian was someone who said:
The wisdom, the voices, the truth of those left out of
power matters just as much as those in power.

The first liberation theologian said:

I see the presence of God in your eyes, you, the poor,
the farm worker, the child in the street, the prostitute,
the beggar, the infirm, the stranger.

Liberation Theology — those are words that folks
starting using a generation ago. But they are words
that describe a religious and spiritual tradition that
goes back to the very beginning of the human
experience. For as long as we have looked at the world
and thought - there's more than meets the eye here -
there have been some who have seen that world and
thought: this is not as it should be.

One of the great educators and spiritual thinkers in the
tradition of Latin American liberation theology and
praxis was Paulo Freire. Freire was born into the
middle class, but when his father died, the family
struggled. Later, they returned to that higher status,
but the experience remained. When poor, he struggled
to learn - because he was hungry.

What would happen if the poor learned?

What would happen if the poor learned about the
country they lived in?

What would happen if they learned why they were
poor?

At the time - mid-century - Brazil required literacy to
vote. Freire taught a group of sugarcane workers to

read. So they could vote. He started teaching other adults to read. And when there was a military coup, Freire was charged as a traitor. For teaching the poor to read. For saying that poverty was not destiny. That poverty wasn't an accident, but was created by systems of power. He spent 15 years outside of Brazil, until a more moderate government took power.

But the Favelas, where he did much of his work, remain. This summer, during the Summer Olympics in Rio, perhaps, for a few minutes of "human interest" or "local color," maybe the camera will visit. But probably not. Favelas are not slums or ghettos - they are vibrant cultural places - but, yes, the people who live there are very poor.

One of the things that Freire was famous for was teaching the children and adults in these places to name the reality of where they lived. He would teach them the word: Favela. Say it: Favela.

To name reality is the first step. Power wishes us to be ignorant, to not see, to not name, so that we will not question.

When I was in seminary, lo those many years ago, one of my professors was Thandeka, who some of you know — she was an affiliated community minister here at this church. She taught us about Favela, and naming reality. Then she said this:

Some of us would go serve congregations in the suburbs. And we should teach people to say it.

Suburbia.

Suburbia.

This was her point:

The Favela is a product of an economic, racial, and political system of power. A system that creates divisions and hierarchies. A system that tells middle-class Brazilians to play by the rules, lest they or their children wind up in the Favela. A system that tells the children of the Favela to feel bad about themselves, to want to get out and leave the poverty behind, instead of asking, why are there places of such poverty?

Suburbia is a product of the same system. The system of economic and political power which creates the Favela is the same system that makes the suburb. It's the same system that leaves abandoned factories in one country and creates sweatshops in another. It's the system that makes us fear each other, that makes us scrape and grasp so we can stay where we are, or climb "up" as if heaven was at the top of the economic ladder.

Can we name the place we live?

Can we learn to see the places that other folks live?

Can we learn to see other people - not as opposites, but in our common humanity?

Can we transcend the dialectic of oppressor-oppressed and see all of us as located in a system that denies the true humanity of us all?

When I came to Rockford 8 years ago for a second visit — I had come here, to this church, in seminary for Thandeka's Ordination, but I had never really been to Rockford -- Dave Black picked us up from the Hilton

near the freeway before we would join the committee for dinner, and said, I want to give you a tour of town. A real tour.

No illusions.

We made our way west. And I thought, I remember, about Favela, and Suburbia.

Can we name it?

Say it with me:

"Big Box Store."

"Sprawl."

"Abandoned storefront."

We drove west.

We crossed the river.

We circled the brand new jail.

Say the words with me:

"Mass Incarceration."

We tacked south down to Morgan street, and around parts of southwest Rockford.

Then back up through downtown and along Harlem - where I live now - to dinner.

Can we name what is happening?

Can we see it?

Say the words:

"Segregation."

"Globalization."

"The Criminalization of poverty"

"Neglect."

What if we drive from here into the northwest suburbs?

Or the far western suburbs?

What if we go through places where there are no abandoned storefronts, every lawn is manicured, every car is parked in a garage, and never is a pothole to be seen? Let alone a poor person.

Can we name it?

Suburbia?

Can we see what is before us?

Can we name it?

Can we dig deeper, and see the clinging to status as a sign of a wounded soul and a blinded heart?

Bound too in a system beyond their control.

What if we drove further west?

To farms and farmers struggling under the forces of consolidation?

To rural communities where hardly anyone under 50 remains?

To small towns and the people who live there but wonder what will become of them?

Can we name it?

Can we see how the farmer in Stockton and the farm worker in Guatemala might have something in common?

This is the task of liberation theology. To see and name the gap between our theology of kinship - our theology of "love your neighbor" and "everyone matters" - to see the gap between that theology and the reality of the world. And to say, this isn't OK. This is a problem. And then to do something. This is the work of liberation theology.

So here we are.

And can we see it?

Can we name it?

The carpenter's son from Nazareth wasn't the only Jewish Socialist to talk about income inequality and the systems of power. We are having a conversation in this country, in this election season, about power, and money, and race. However you vote a week from Tuesday, and I haven't decided myself, haven't even decided what party's ballot I'll pick up; if I want to make a strategic vote against a terrifying enemy, or if I'll vote for the skilled tactician or the iconoclastic messenger; so it's not about who you vote for, that's a complicated personal choice - but however you vote, it is good that we are having the conversation about economic injustice.

About the wealth gap.

About racism and power.

About the implicit, natural corruption of our system of government.

It's a necessary conversation.

It's about naming what is going on. What we all know is going on - if we open our eyes to see.

And, just as liberation theology isn't new, the unequal distribution of power and wealth isn't new, either. Throughout history, those who have benefited most from this structure have given every excuse under the sun for why it is so. It is because the poor are lazy, or because they have been cursed by God, or because the rich have been blessed by God. Or, because there is something about them that is less human than us. That's the central excuse.

And the them and us division can be anything you chose:

they are a different religion

they are from a different tribe

they speak a different language

they are a different race.

In America, the concept of race as we know it today was invented explicitly and intentionally to explain and perpetuate income inequality. The rich wanted to get and stay rich, so they stole the labor and the lives of imported and enslaved Africans. And they convinced poor whites to go along with the system of economic exploitation and injustice on a simple premise: don't complain about being poor - it could be worse. You could be black.

There's a candidate on the ballot a week from Tuesday in Illinois - let's just say his name sounds like Drumpf - who has revived and exploited this cultural bargain: America never was America to me, wrote Langston Hughes, but when the claim is made, Make America Great Again, this is the implicit - indeed, explicit - promise: to restore the order. Black and brown folks on the bottom. Above them, poor whites.

But what isn't said, of course:
above them: the so-called middle class.
And above them: the rich.

Racism is a force on its own, an unleashed dragon, but it was created in order, and is being used today in order, to perpetuate a system of economic and political

exploitation which keeps almost everyone - almost everyone, regardless of the color of your skin, out of the chambers of authority.

We see the same facts.

The same reality.

Some folks feel excluded from power, power which seems increasingly corrupt.

But what is our conclusion from that reality?

Do we, like the schoolyard bully, beat up some weaker kid so that we will feel more powerful even though we are beat at home by our own parents?

Or do we start to feel multiracial, multiethnic, multi-economic solidarity; do we transcend the polarity, while remembering our location, in favor of our common humanity?

Can we sing those words and mean it?

"Our world is one world: what touches one affects us all."

Can we see, can we sing:

there's a river flowing my soul, and your soul,
and every soul?

Can your enemy become your friend?

I do want to say that this work — to see what is before us, to name it as a violation of the spirit of love and kinship - is not just to be done on a national level.

I could preach a whole sermon about the outrage of there being no state budget, and that those who pay the price for this failure are who?

Mom's of small children trying to get a job;

seniors trying to keep their heat on;

college students trying to improve their lives;

folks working with troubled teens to keep them out of trouble;
the list goes on - but you get the idea.
The most vulnerable.
The least noticed by the powers that be.

Construction companies are still getting paid, and multinational corporations are still getting their tax credits, but the poor, the young and the old, they've become hostages in a battle for power. Like infantry thrown into war by armchair generals, expendable for the sake of an ideological struggle. Can we name it?
Can we see it?

Our world is one world, and that's the other end of this story, for it is not just within the borders of a nation that this question is alive - indeed, we miss the real story entirely if we do not see past the shore and the line in the dirt we have drawn in our hubris. Can we begin to see the full humanity of someone who lives across the globe? Not just the child refugee who longs to be here, or anywhere but where they are - or the grandmother in the Favela, cooking up a dish for her beloveds, but the factory worker doing the job you used to do for 10 cents on the dollar.

Instead of suspicion and jealousy, instead of resentment - whether that comes from the left or the right - can we make solidarity with that worker? Can we see ourselves as bound together wherever we live, whatever our tribe, our color, our faith, our tongue?
One humanity.

One world.
One river.

Some of the practitioners of liberation theology get pretty far into politics. And there's a place to engage the civic world. But I hope we are careful about that engagement. I hope that we remember that our politicians and wanna-be politicians are not really our leaders - they respond to our hungers, our fears, and our dreams. They follow.

A few weeks ago, it hit me.
Vladimir is feeling the Bern.
Estragon is with her.

Only some of you get that joke, so let me explain:
in Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir - who is overly excitable and energetic - and Estragon - who is calm, somewhat cynical even - wait.
They wait for Godot.
The whole play, they wait.
Spoiler alert: Godot doesn't come.

Godot could be God, of course, but Godot is also anything we wait for that we think will save us. Vote for whomever you like, but, my friends, politics will not save us. No president will save us - or doom us. Or doom us. Really.
Your vote is important but voting will not save us.

Love will save us. Liberation will save us.
Naming the truth, solidarity across the lines of division, that is what will save us - save us from ourselves, from our divisions, from the forces of oppression.

Si te quiero

If I adore you

it is because you are my love,
and in the street, arm in arm,
we are so much more than two.

I love you because your hands work for justice,
you know how to cry out for justice.

Love and solidarity and humanity will save us. To
transcend the polarity of oppressor and oppressed,
and realize we've all been duped into thinking this way
of things is OK when it isn't.

To learn to read, to read the signs of the times
and the geography of power,
to teach one another the names for the places we live.

This is how we will save ourselves and each other.

When we know in our bones and in our blood that we
are bound together.

That we are kin, and that we must have a town, a
country, a world where we treat each other with loving
kindness.

That we learn to sing together,
to walk hand in hand,
so that we might,
someday, someday,
live in peace;
so that we might,
hand in hand,
someday,
all be free.