

Peace and Liberation Theology

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Abstract:

This article uses a story of a Honduran immigrant to explore liberation theology and peace. Gloria's story is used because liberation theology makes sense of God in human experience. It captures Christ's concern for the most vulnerable of society as expressed by "let the oppressed go free." Gloria's story puts God's gift of peace into practice by giving voice to the voiceless and demonstrates how peace is formed in justice.

Key Words: peace, Liberation Theology, social justice

Introduction

Thank you Pastor Lynnae, Pastor Brad for your invitation to be here tonight. Grace and Peace be unto you from God our creator and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I was delighted to receive this invitation from your pastors, my former students. I now consider them my colleagues in mission and ministry. It is a joy to be in mission with your pastors!

When they called and invited me to be here tonight – I asked, "What's the topic?" We want you to speak about the peace of God and liberation theology, they said. Great, liberation theology is up my alley. I then made the mistake of asking the question, "How long do I have to preach?" They said: 10 to 12 minutes. I thought, "Are you kidding me? Don't you know by now that I'm Hispanic! We never preach for 10 – 12 minutes. We always get carried away by the wind of the Spirit

and then blame the Holy Spirit for having preached too long.” That’s just the way it is in our culture.

All joking aside, I am truly grateful to be here tonight representing the Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest in Austin, Texas. This year we are celebrating forty years of mission and ministry in Central Texas and the world. It is a program that not only serves the needs of our churches in Texas but also the entire United States and other countries. We are very proud of that history and that record. It is certainly one to be proud of. This accomplishment would not have been possible without your support. So I thank you for the many ways in which your support allows us to strengthen and grow in our mission and ministry, a mission that has extended to Austin and around the world. Muchas gracias!

The gospel from Luke: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18-19, NRSV). Liberation theologians from Latin America reflected on this mission statement of Jesus of Nazareth (Boff & Boff, 1982; Groody, 2011; Groody & Gutierrez, 2013; Gutierrez, 1995). This text was proclaimed by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee following his baptism and time in the desert. Jesus knows who he is and what his call is about. You know Jesus got in trouble for proclaiming this gospel in the synagogue. He finished by saying, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21, NRSV). He was run out of town and onto a cliff in Nazareth to be thrown off but he escaped from the crowd. It is indeed dangerous to proclaim the gospel that sets captives free and gives sight to the blind and lets the oppressed go free!

How do we sum up the gospel in a seventy-five year-old history of liberation theology that has come to us from Latin America? I need more than 10 or 12 minutes. I was wrestling with this question, wondering how I would summarize this

history in a way that would make sense. Then the light bulb went on. It occurred to me to tell you a story in the tradition of Jesus of Nazareth and of our Hispanic/Latino community.

Gloria's Story

This is a true story. One of the delights, benefits and gifts that we have as a Lutheran seminary program is the opportunity to take students every year (their first year in seminary) to the US – Mexico borderlands – anywhere from El Paso to Brownsville. We call it our J-term or our January term. During the first year in seminary they are still wet behind the ears. We have them to form and so we seize the opportunity to take students to the border and to expose them to the realities of life along the US/Mexico border where I come from. I know the area well. We visit many churches and agencies. We hear a lot from folks who are actively involved in mission and ministry serving the community. They are bringing the good news to the poor, proclaiming release to captives, recovering sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free. That pretty much sums up the mission statement of all the missionaries along the US/Mexico border.

Every year we go to a particular church. I repeatedly ask for a member of the congregation to speak to our students. One year I heard a story from a woman that grabbed my attention. I knew I had to continue to hear her story for my own ongoing conversion. I ask for her every year when we take a new group of students to the border. They get to hear Gloria's story (her name has been changed).

Gloria is from Honduras, Central America. She's been living along the US/Mexican border for some ten years. As a young lady Gloria grew up in dire poverty. She lived with her parents, siblings and grandmother. The floor of her home was literally made of packed dirt, the very earth that sustained her family. They did not eat well. Their casita was a shack. Once in a while as she was growing up she would go to church with her grandmother, typical in many families in Latin America. So

she grew up with a sense of faith in her home. She also grew up hungry and often did not go to school. As she was starting to get older, she decided that surely there had to be a better way of living than in this condition in abject hopeless poverty.

One day she was reflecting on her life dreaming about what life might bring to her. She happened to be walking along a dirt path when she ran across a piece of paper. For some reason she was called to pick it up. She picked it up and she read these words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega." These are Greek words from the Scriptures, "I am the beginning and the end" in reference to God. In a mysterious way these words spoke to her. She probably heard those words in church. Gloria began to think of those words and relate them to her life. What was God saying through those words to her and to her life? She was literally wrestling with her life experience and the word of God. She was asking an existential question: how to prosper, if we can even use that word in her context, how to live like God would dream of her living.

Liberation theology has much to do with context, the place we come from for it is there that theology is constructed to make sense of God in the human experience (Gutierrez, 1990). She decided to leave home and country to journey north. Somehow the United States and going north caught her imagination. She walked north on her walk was truly a walk in faith. She ended up crossing through Guatemala. She crossed the river between Guatemala and Mexico. She eventually ended up getting on a train that is known as "La bestia," or the beast. On the train there were hundreds of young people and unaccompanied minors on the journey to the US. She finally made it to northern Mexico, to the Mexican side of the border. There she met a man, in time married him and had a family. Life was not easy and she knew that life had to be better than living a meager existence on the Mexican side of the border. There had to be a better life waiting on the other side and all that divided her from her idea of a better life was a river.

She kept telling her husband that they had to get to the United States. "We have to go north." He would argue with her, "Why? I have a job. Let's just stay here until we do a little bit better." It was the same line over and over again. She became impatient. She wanted a better life not just for herself but for her children. So she decided to do it on her own. She crossed the river with her children and made it. She left a note for her husband, "I left. I have to cross the river." He had no choice but to come over as well. Long story short, they have established their home along the border and in time joined a faith community.

The interesting part of the story is that before she became a part of this faith community, before her husband joined her, she was living in a humble casita without much food or comfort. It was Christmas Eve and she was huddled with her children in a blanket telling them the story of the birth of Jesus. She heard a knock on her door and lo and behold it was a lady from the church in that community. She had a box of food with a cooked turkey and all the trimmings. Gloria had learned enough English to say: "Wow!" She was overwhelmed by God's grace! She was amazed that God's grace reached her through a woman of faith who had somehow learned that she was in need and surprised her with a Christmas Eve dinner for her family. It was Christmas! Jesus was incarnate in that kind woman.

In a sense this is what liberation theology is all about. It's about people being set free to be fully who God intended them to be. Gloria is now a significant member of that community of faith. Her church is helping her to prepare all of her documents to become a full-fledged citizen of this country. Her children are in that process as well. It took a faith community to see her needs and create the safe space for her to rebuild her life in light of a gospel that was being proclaimed in the faith community. Through their actions the people of God were saying "the spirit of the Lord is upon us because God anointed us to bring good news to the poor." Gloria was that poor person, the recipient of the good news! The Spirit created

the church for mission: to proclaim release to the captives from their poverty, human degradation, lack of education, the voiceless, the hopeless, and recovery of sight to the blind, the blind who cannot see hope possible in a world that is difficult and challenging. God sent us to free the oppressed!

I continue to go back to the border every year. As part of our requirement, we go to an area of the country that has been referred to by theologians as a third country, neither Mexico nor the US. It is a heavily militarized zone between the two nations where I grew up. When we come near the border and approach those towns that are so familiar to me, something happens to me. The air seems to take on another quality of molecules. You can sense it. It is like the energy in the atmosphere gets charged. All of a sudden you see the border patrol cars left and right on both sides of the highway. You see the drones above. You see the border patrol helicopters looking for drug traffickers and for folks like Gloria who may be lost in the brush country of south Texas. When we get to the border we see the fence that separates our two nations. That fence was not there when I was growing up. We used to cross over to go see my relatives. It is a different world now, and yet the same place where the church was planted many years ago. Our church along the border is proclaiming the good news to people like Gloria. There are many Gloria's along the US - Mexico border.

Peace and Liberation Theology

So what does the peace of God have to do with that I am telling you? When I heard Gloria's story for the first time the story enveloped me! The Spirit of God took a hold of me and of the students as we sat in silence before this saint of God. She was speaking to us with a peace that surpassed all human understanding. She was conveying the peace of God to us from and within her own existential reality – her experience. The peace of God in liberation theology is about taking that peace that God has given us as gift and putting it to practice in what we in the Evangelical Church in America (ELCA) confess as “God's work, our hands,” a slogan for life in mission in the context of a

broken world. That is what we are doing along the border. This is where we encountered Gloria. The church has taken the peace of God and is helping folks like Gloria to re-create their lives, to allow them a voice in the church. Peace can only be achieved through justice. Gloria's peace comes from a church that saw her as a suffering human being, a child of God worthy of human dignity. The church helped her to reclaim and affirm her worth!

The church needs to hear the voice of the poor and the voiceless. When the church hears their story and the peace shared with us by folks like Gloria, is there some tension in us? Is there some unrest created? Yes, I will confess to you that there is. I will not deny that reality. There is spiritual unrest created in the church when we hear our neighbors having to experience poverty because of economic systems that deprive the landless of a voice and a life experience worthy of human dignity.

Gustavo Gutierrez, a Roman Catholic Peruvian priest, is known as the father of liberation theology (Brown, 1990). He tells us that liberation theology came not from abstract thinking, but from hearing the voices of the poor in his community in the slums of Lima, Peru. That is where liberation theology was birthed. This theology coined the expression "the preferential option for the poor" (Groody & Gutierrez, 2013, p. 3). It is an expression that did not dismiss those who were not considered poor by material standards. It recognized that there is a universality of God's love and grace for all of creation for we know that God so loved the world that God gave God's son for the sake of the world. The church needs to hear that story from the perspective and experience of the poor. They have a voice that the church needs to hear. They have become a channel of God's grace to the church – not that poverty is anything to emulate but a condition to protest! So the peace of God is a voice seeking to be expressed through the hands of the people of God. It is peace founded on justice (Gutierrez, 1995, p. xliii).

Given the condition of the human family, the poor will always be among us. It is for that reason that we need to hear

their voice, in order that we might understand what the peace of God means in and through their experience. Many have written on this topic, myself included. That was the very topic of my dissertation. We have time to reflect briefly on what this peace might mean for us.

You may have heard of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador who was assassinated in 1980 at the altar when he was celebrating mass. He was an advocate for peace with justice. Beatified Oscar Romero was and still is a shepherd of God's people. He spoke out against state sanctioned terrorism; terrorism against the voiceless poor. He devoted years of his life to it. In the end, Oscar Romero gave his life as a priest who ministered peace to his community in a time of extreme violence against God's people. This is what he says to us about peace: "Peace is not the produce of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of violent repression. Peace is a generous, tranquil contribution to the good of all. Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity. Peace is a right and it is a duty" (Brockman, 1984, p. 24). In other words, peace is a human right for the sake of the common good. But it can only be achieved through justice.

Conclusion

So how do we as a church go about creating this kind of peace in contexts such as the US/Mexico borderlands, in the context such as Gloria's life? In reality, I believe that we are all called to set the captives free as the gospel proclaims. It is not an idea. It is a mandate to set the captives free, to help recover their sight as well as our own. It takes hands to do it and our church is doing it. And you are doing it through your support of our program. Your support allows us to take our students to the border. There they examine and reflect on a place in our state and nation that is very conflicted where real people of faith live, move and have their being.

You are participants in what the ELCA calls "God's work, our hands." In so doing you are involved in building the

reign of God here on earth at this time. Peace can only happen through justice. Peace is found in serving our neighbors. It comes in liberating them from what keeps them bound, oppressed or robs them of their innate dignity as children of God. Peace means asking the difficult questions, the ones we would rather not ask, and respond generously to them through the work of our hands.

Thank you for your peace. Thank you for your generosity of spirit. Thank you for your open hearts and minds that allowed me to share my story and Gloria's story with you. May God continue to walk with you in this journey of peace. Amen.

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Biographical Sketch

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