

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church, Pinole CA

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost      July 5, 2020

## *“Reflection on Liberation Theology”*

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Good morning on the Sunday of our country’s Independence Day. I hope everyone survived alright last night. The fireworks were amazing, dangerous, and in most cases, illegal. But here we are at Independence Day weekend. We are called at this time in our history, 244 years after this country declared itself separate from Great Britain, to look at what independence meant for those who are not able to celebrate and whose rites are not recognized.

On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass gave a keynote address at an Independence Day celebration and asked, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" His speech was delivered at an event commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence, held at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York. It was a scathing speech in which Douglass stated, "This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

I recommend giving it a read. With that in mind we look at ourselves and where Jesus leads us in response. Today I give you commentary and insight into the scripture from the lens of what is called “Liberation Theology.”

Liberation theology has been adopted through its roots in Catholicism and is a vibrant movement in Latin America. Liberation theology is way of looking at scripture and the works of God emphasizing liberation from social, political, and economic oppression as an anticipation of ultimate salvation.

In truth, a main portion of the Old Testament, like our readings from Jeremiah or Zachariah and even the Psalms, puts forth a liberation theology for the Hebrew people. A theology that reassured them God was on their side. A belief that if they continued to endure, God would give them even double the portion of their suffering. We see this reflected in the Book of Job.

So let’s examine our scripture today with liberation theology in mind, and notice that with today’s current circumstances, we have more in common with these struggling ancient people than we realize. We have relentlessly taken the wrong path over and over again in history, but this is not the way of Jesus. Maybe, just maybe, all the suffering that is around us will liberate us

from our old ways of being and bring us closer to the Kingdom of God on Earth. Maybe independence and salvation can be brought together.

Jana Riess, a Christian author, suggests about today's Gospel that both John and Jesus were chided for, let us say, "not playing Reindeer games." In order to appreciate "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" you have to ask what were they expecting?

Most of the time when we are disappointed, it is not the fault of the presenter or the product, but mainly that our expectation was not in line with what we receive. So the question is, who were they expecting?

From some of the interpretations of scripture, maybe a man that was "a reed blown by the wind" - Old Testament speak for someone influenced by the current philosophy or intellectual fashion? Or maybe a man worthy through birth or wealth to wear royal robes, someone who influences by power, wealth or politics?

Neither John nor Jesus fit into this expectation.

But since Jesus mentions John, and our lectionary abbreviated some of the actual scripture, let's look at John for a moment. If you examine John's theology, it is one of judgment, make no mistake. He is constantly yelling, "Repent!" John was too countercultural, too threatening to the status quo.

John was passing out judgment and condemnation. Not what the crowd wanted to hear. Can't possibly be from God, right? God never does things in our lives that we don't like. The truth is never too hard to deal with?

If we dig deeper, and take a quick imaginary look at John, his history, his lifestyle, it speaks volumes. John, the man dressed in animal skins, the guy who eats honey. I can surely bet he was not the teacher's pet, nor the popular one in the crowd. His parents were older, probably died while John was young. A life of living in the desert, even with God at your shoulder, is a hard life, a pushed-aside life, a not-heard life. A mocked man can make anyone want to be judge and jury, even if it is in the name of God. Needless to say, John is off the Messiah list.

In many respects, Jesus' ministry is also one of judgment. Yet, it is largely positive judgment. Jesus' ministry, instead of merely condemning people, sees the possibility for their redemption. This is a theology of liberation. The very words "blessed are the meek," show us there is salvation for all.

Jesus, although a Hebrew and of the same family as John, I would guess had an easier life. Joseph was considered skilled labor, Jesus had siblings – of some sort. They had traveled, so chances are they knew important people, and Jesus was allowed to teach in the temple at a young age. The same message of needing to repent, however, an invitation to redeem oneself, rather than condemnation, is what Jesus offers.

I cannot tell you how important it is that we embrace the message of Jesus. For there are many prophets out in the public mainstream that preach like John. Many who are coming at life from a traumatic past. We must remember that John's message is only the precursor to Jesus' way of love.

Martin Luther King states, "In struggling for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not allow themselves to become bitter or indulge in hate campaigns. To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in our world. We have learned through the grim realities of life and history that hate and violence solve nothing. They only push us deeper and deeper into the mire. Violence begets violence; hate begets hate; and toughness begets a greater toughness. It is all a descending spiral, and the end is destruction for everybody." ["The Current Crisis in Race Relations" in \*A Testament of Hope\*, Washington, 87\)](#)

If you have experienced violence in your life, if you are a person of color, if you have had gender discrimination, if you have suffered at the hands of society, or personal biases, Dr. King speaks to you. Jesus speaks to you. We have an amazing opportunity at hand in this country to amend some of our history, some of our political and socioeconomic policies, but violence won't do it.

Personally, I feel the greatest threat to evil is knowledge. In today's Epistle there is the struggle between what we know is right and what we do. There lies the burden that Jesus tells us to leave with him. So you might say, OK, I can just leave my burden on Jesus, but then

why do I not sleep well at night, why does my anxiety go up? Or maybe the thoughts are ones of vengeance and anger, of justification.

Well, per our faith tradition, but more succinctly, Jesus tells us that judge and jury are God's domain – and He is merciful – that's a very fancy way of saying – It is not your job to judge people – it's God.

Jesus has taught us that we are worth more than sparrows, he knows the hairs on our head, and he hears our pleas. He also explains that the answers to those prayers may look different than our expectations. God's ways are not our ways. So like the lilies of the field, you are to give your worries to Jesus. The plain way of saying that is "let it go."

Imagine if you were no longer angry, no longer frustrated, no longer desired vengeance, did not participate in violence or hurting yourself or others. Imagine if you listened with the heart of Jesus when making your decisions and therefore could always use life trials as a learning lesson. Wouldn't life be great! It can be.

And no, it's not boring. When you leave your burdens on Jesus, it gives you the room for compassion and action. To read and become educated on the different versions of history, of the government policies and legal decisions, to sign petitions, to attend education in some kind of format that not only enhances your life, but can be shared by others, to get involved in the voting process. If we took all the energy we have with those negative ways and reversed that into positivity, if we truly did leave our burdens with Jesus, we can create the kingdom of God.

Maybe this is the real beginning of Independence Day not for some, but for all. Maybe when we have hindsight into 2020 we will be able to celebrate our liberation from destructive ways. The celebration of truly following Jesus.

Not only preaching liberation theology – but living it every day in every way.

Amen