



"On Liberation"

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Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Reading

Today's first reading is an excerpt from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Friere, Brazilian educator and philosopher.

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not "marginals," are not people living "outside" society. They have always been "inside"—inside the structure which made them "beings for others." The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves."

Part I: On Liberation

Travel with me to Latin America, the part of the world we now call Mexico, Central America, and South America.



I'm offering a map because as I was writing this, I needed to be reminded that the term "Latin America" covers a lot of land and holds a lot of people. The area between Mexico and Argentina is vast and diverse.

These lands have been inhabited for more than 30,000 years and currently contain over 800 groups of Indigenous peoples.

The history of these lands includes colonization and conquest, war and extinction.

The land was colonized by the Spanish beginning with Christopher Columbus, which led to the name "Latin America."

These lands and people are beautiful, rich, colorful, and beloved.

These lands and people are not the same, although we lump them together. For today, I will speak of Latin America because it is the birthplace of liberation theology.

Our spiritual theme for the month of February is "liberation." We last explored this theme in April of 2020, the month after we shut down for Covid. You can imagine the rich struggle of "liberation" in the midst of restriction and confinement. Almost three years later, we return to this theme as we re-emerge into a different, and sometimes not-so-different, world.

It's not by accident that liberation theology was born in Latin America.

This land was colonized, ancient and advanced civilizations were exterminated, and after colonization, there were wars for freedom.

Many Latin American countries didn't achieve freedom from Europe until the 19th century. What followed was a drive for independence, forming and reforming governments, commerce and expansion into global markets.

As is true in most countries, there was and is great disparity between those with enough, some with more than enough, and those without enough.

Just as is true in the United States, the many and varied natural resources are a source of riches, which have not been equally or equitably shared. Just as important, if not more so, the countries of Latin America have not been allowed to enjoy the fruits of their labor or natural resources as both have been exploited by developed countries like the United States.

Colonization also brought the often-brutal imposition of the Spanish religion onto Indigenous people. Columbus brought Catholicism with him, and Catholic missionaries were part of the process of exterminating or subjugating Indigenous people. The Catholic faith remains strong to this day.

Most scholars agree that, while liberation theologies existed before, modern liberation theology was born at the second Latin American Bishops' Conference in 1968, held in Medellín, Colombia. In that conference, the gathered Catholic priests affirmed the rights of the poor and declared that industrialized nations had been enriched at the expense of developing nations, their homelands.

The foundational text of liberation theology was written in 1971 by Bishop Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest and theologian. Another leader of the movement you might recognize is Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador. Both had ministries of service to the poor and both had come to understand that putting faith in action to alleviate the unnecessary suffering brought by poverty was central to their faith.

In the US at about the same time, we were engaged in our own movement for liberation, a movement for civil rights. The life and work of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the work of liberation. As he expanded his thinking from race to include class as an area of oppression, he moved closer to the theology that would be articulated in Latin America not long after his death. In the US, King's liberatory work continues today, most directly through the Poor People's Campaign, led by Rev. William Barber and Rev. Liz Theoharis out of Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Latin American liberation theology addresses the core concerns of marginalized communities in need of social, political, and economic equality and justice, seeking liberation for the oppressed. The foundation of liberation theology is that God speaks through the poor, and that the sacred text of the Bible can only be understood through the perspective of the poor. The Latin American bishops asserted that their Catholic church was different from the church in Europe because they were called to meet the basic needs of their people: food, water, housing, waste control, electricity. In addition to meeting basic needs, liberation theologians were called to question why the injustice of poverty existed in the first place. They embraced charity and justice both as holy work, the best expression of the life of Jesus lived in our time.

Liberation theologians were villainized by governments in their countries and in developed countries around the world. They were called communists for demanding that all receive basic needs. Governments were afraid of the church moving from being a conservative force—a force that conserves the status quo—to a force for justice, which required change. Another of the great liberation theologians, Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil, said, “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.”

Each of these leaders was grounded in a theology that called for liberation for all. While they come from different religious traditions, each has a set of beliefs and values that called them to action for collective liberation.

I think one of the important things to notice from their example is that people committed to action toward liberation need a spirituality, a set of values, a belief system that helps articulate the “why” of our actions. The

work of liberation requires that we be committed to human freedom, and it is hard work. We must know our why, the basis for our actions, so we have a place to return to when we are angry, discouraged, and weary. And, we must have people who share our vision and values so we can remember that we are not alone.

Reading

Our second reading is from American scholar and activist bell hooks. This is from her essay “Love as the Practice of Freedom” in her book *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*.

The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.

Part II: On Liberation

One of the many things I love about my ministry here is that I get to work with thoughtful and committed people. One group I so appreciate is the Worship Arts Team, whose members you see helping to hold the sacred space for our worship every Sunday morning. Each month when we meet, I invite the Team members to reflect on the spiritual theme for the upcoming month.

When we reflected together on the theme of liberation, sharing stories and images, almost all the stories were of times when we felt free, and most of the images were of freedom. The image for today’s service, of a bird and bars, was the result of that reflection.

Indeed, freedom is one of the definitions of liberation. But I think there’s a reason it’s called liberation theology and not freedom theology, and it has to do with interconnection.

Remember the story Sara told earlier about Keiko, the orca who was held captive for over 20 years? There are many lessons to be learned from this story and many questions to ponder. The part of the story that I am drawn to is how the humans working with Keiko believed that in order for Keiko to be free, they needed to stop interacting with him. The humans ignored him even when he sought contact, and he was confused. The humans believed that in order for Keiko to be free, he needed to be wild, separate from humans. They believed that freedom meant disconnection.

I think it is a particular American trait that suggests freedom is disconnection. We value our freedoms in this country, and we should. They are codified in our founding documents and laws, and we wrestle with them in the court of law and the court of public opinion.

The European founders of this country wrote documents based on their experience of fighting for freedom from England, a dominant culture and legal system that they wanted to separate from. Our freedoms were intentionally based on disconnection.

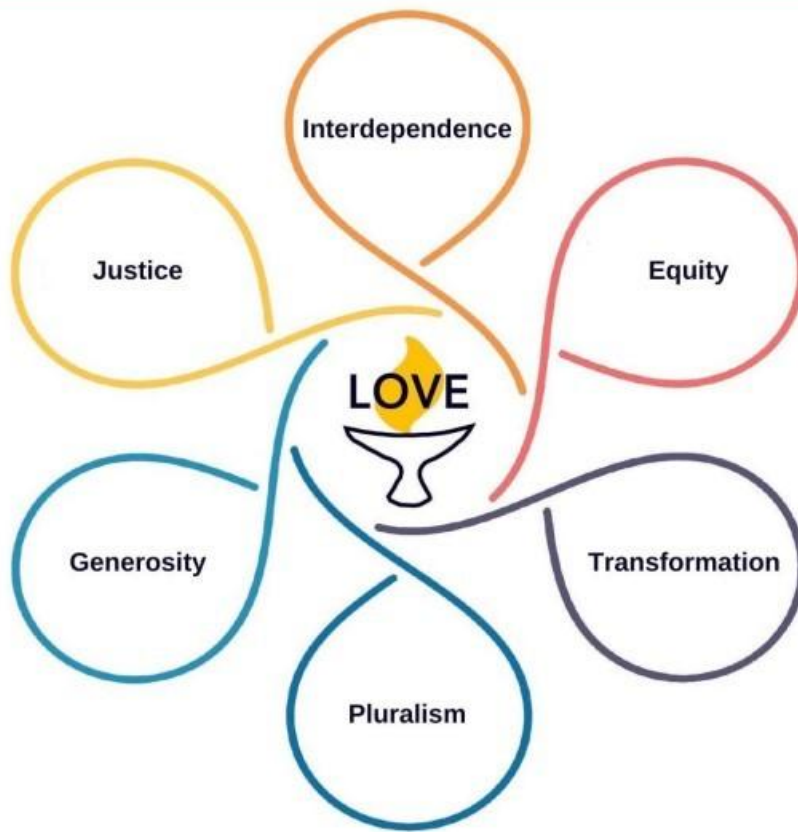
And there are some who say that freedom means “I can do whatever I want.” Often that statement comes with the addition that “I can do whatever I want without consequences.” Which simply isn’t true and perhaps a topic for another day. This is an individualistic view of freedom, which ignores that we are connected. It denies the web of life that holds us all together.

And so, I find it helpful to distinguish between freedom, which in America equates with individualism, and liberation, which suggests connection. Liberation is acting in ways that help others be free. As our opening reading said: “Any liberation—all liberation—is collective liberation. My freedom is bound with yours and yours with mine. Inextricably.”

Prophets through the ages have said something like the words of Fannie Lou Hamer: “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” It’s in the Bible. And it’s in the Garth Brooks song that Troy sung earlier. Despite our individualistic tendencies, prophets of all kinds remind us that we are connected, we are not alone.

The inequity that led to the creation of Latin American liberation theology exists today, perhaps even more so. It is a national and global challenge. Climate change is forcing us to realize that not all countries will be affected equally or have the resources to adapt. Developed countries like the US contribute to climate change in ways that affect developing nations disproportionately. People around the world are immigrating, legally or not, because of climate change and the resulting poverty, famine, political and social unrest. Many people in Latin America are seeking refuge in the US, as we determine immigration policy. How will we respond?

It is our values that inform our actions, and when we are clear about our values, we have a clear path to putting our faith into action.



This is a representation of core Unitarian Universalist values given to us by the Article II Commission (more on that next Sunday). For now, notice what is at the center: Love. bell hooks wrote this truth: “The moment we choose to love, we move toward freedom to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.” Love is at the center of our faith and love is at the center of liberation.

I think putting love at the center means realizing that we are connected and that our actions impact others, actions from our past and in our present. It means noticing the impact of our actions, both positive and challenging, and sometimes unintentional. It means choosing our actions based on the awareness of our connection. It means making amends when we can and acting for the liberation of others as well as our own.

In his landmark work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Friere wrote that “love is an act of courage, not fear.” In the weeks and months ahead, may we be brave as we do the work of love.

As we close today, we are going to sing a freedom song from South Africa, “Freedom is Coming.” As we do so, let’s hold in our hearts and minds the words of Nelson Mandela: *“To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”*

Let’s sing together.