Beyond Liberation Preaching
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Yesterday we were dealing with the functioning ecclesiology within which our preaching takes place, and how that ecclesiology hinders the possibility of genuine liberation preaching. The suggestion I was trying to leave in your minds was that of a multiple approach to the issues of liberation, so that the entire life of the congregation may take on the form of the praxis of liberation without which liberation theology and preaching are not possible. Following up on that approach, what I would like to do today is to explore what shape other aspects of the life of the church, such as counseling and the educational program of the church, would take within the context of such a liberation praxis. I realize that, from the point of view of the traditional distinctions within the curriculum of seminary, I am straying from my subject, which should be under the heading of homiletics, and wandering into what is properly the preserve of other specialists. One might say that I have been invited here to deal with liberation preaching and gone to liberation meddling. So be it. But if we are to deal with the subject of liberation preaching, we must also deal with the basic claim of liberation theology, that its insights must relate to every aspect of the life of the church.

Let us turn first of all to the practice of counseling in our churches. A major charge by liberation theology is that much counseling, both within and outside the church, seeks to adjust the person to the society, without even asking the question of that society's sinfulness and injustice. If there is disease, the cure must be sought by helping the person adjust to the surrounding

reality, with very few questions, if any, asked about the possibility that the reality itself may be diseased.

Such a description of the work of pastoral counseling is not quite accurate. For instance, since the turn of the century we have moved from a practice of marriage counseling whose goal was almost always to help the couple adjust to each other, and make the marriage work, to a practice in which we are willing to accept that some marriages may be so flawed that the problem is with the marriage itself rather than with the individuals involved. Whereas earlier we thought that our goal was to help a person adjust to a marriage, no matter what the circumstances, now we are ready to admit that some marriages may themselves need adjusting, or even dissolving.

While this is true with reference to marriage situations, we have seldom applied to our counseling the notion that it is not necessarily bad to be maladjusted to a society flawed by sin and injustice. We live in an unjust society, where racism, classism and sexism are rampant, and with economic and social structures that keep many of the poor permanently dispossessed, generation after generation. We live in a society where we are told that our value depends on our employment and productivity, but whose economic machinery functions best when there is a "healthy" level of unemployment. Many in the middle class find that they are replaceable cogs in a giant machine whose goals and methods are beyond their consent or their power to

change. This is the background and the foreground within which our pastoral counseling takes place, no matter whether we take it into account or not.

And yet, the way I was taught pastoral counseling, and the way I still tend to practice it, is to ignore such matters. If someone comes to me in the midst of personal turmoil, I am quite likely to look for the cause of that turmoil, and therefore for its cure, in that person's private life, or at best in that person's relationship to parents, spouse and children, rather than in the wider society.

In my better moments, I know why I do this. It is not simply that I was taught a sort of counseling that bears the mark of the consumer society—I was taught to refer to parishioners coming for counseling as “clients” and the non-directive counseling of my days in seminary came very close to the notion that “the customer is always right.” It is also that I would not know what to do if the person were to come to the conclusion that there is indeed something wrong with the society, and then come to the even more difficult conclusion that it may be impossible, at least in the immediate future, to change whatever is wrong. In other words, I would not know what to do with the feeling of powerlessness in my parishioner. I know what to do with feelings of guilt, anger, or anxiety. But the frustration of powerlessness is not something with which I can easily deal.

Powerlessness is a tabu conclusion for the American middle class. Whenever I speak at a church or Sunday school about one of the many problem areas of the world, such as hunger or the turmoil in Central America, the first question that everyone asks is, “what should we do about it?” In some ways, this is a very commendable response, for an important component of it is compassion for those less fortunate than we, and anger at the injustices they must suffer. But it is also a response born out of a conviction that we have the power to do something without major structural change in our own lives –changes that we are either unable or unwilling to bring about. My answer, which most congregations are not ready to hear, is that perhaps the first thing we need to do is to acknowledge that we can't fix it by simply deciding to do so. Once we come to such an acknowledgment, we can begin to understand what is the common experience of people who suffer from hunger, or who are uprooted in Central America. This is not the answer that American liberals want to hear. They want to hear that they are powerful, that they can indeed fix it. Again, powerlessness is a taboo conclusion for the American middle class.

And yet, there can be no liberation theology without an acknowledgment of powerlessness. Those who cannot recognize that they are sick cannot recognize that they need a doctor. Liberation theology and preaching, even among our middle-class congregations, must not be about how we can or should liberate South African Blacks or Latin American peasants, but rather about our own oppression, about our own powerlessness, and then about how our powerlessness, our oppression, and our comfortable acquiescence to it contribute to the

powerlessness and oppression of South African Blacks and Latin American peasants. Once we acknowledge our real powerlessness to do justice, we can begin to organize in order to see that justice is done.

Therefore, the first great task of liberation counseling in our middle-class context is to help us come to terms with our powerlessness, and with the reasons --economic, social, and political—why our society makes it so difficult for us to acknowledge and claim that powerlessness.

The second task before us as we seek to practice liberation counseling is to learn to question the parameters within which the existing order makes us think. Take, for instance, the entire question of the family and family life. Our society bemoans the crisis through which the American family is going-the growing divorce rate, the temporary living arrangements, and the high number of runaway children. Society's answer is that we must "strengthen family life," and that this is something which the churches are particularly well equipped to do. There is a measure of truth to that, and I do not wish to question the value of the church's work in dealing with the family crisis, as far as it goes.

The problem is that seldom in the course of such work do we question the definition of the problem. We take for granted that the crisis in family life can be explained as a crisis in values and traditions. Again, this is partially true. But perhaps we should go further and question the

very notion of the family that lies behind the definition of the problem. When we begin to do that, we realize that the ideal family, as the problem defines it, may already be part of the problem. Indeed, the very notion of the "family" as the nuclear family composed of parents and children, is a fairly modern notion. The most common notion of "family," both in other cultural traditions and in our own until relatively recent times, is what we now call the "extended family," comprising not only parents and children, but also cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents and grandchildren. In most of Western culture, the demise of the extended family in favor of the nuclear family is mostly the result of the Industrial Revolution and of the mobility that it required and encouraged in workers. In our own society, it is also the result of our origins in immigration and the tradition of westward migration, which is one of the formative experiences of the nation.

In any case, when one looks at the course of history in larger terms, it would appear that the nuclear family, far from being the stable foundation of society that we now seek to make it, is probably a transitory stage in the demise of the extended family. It is a rear-guard action against the dissolution of the traditional family which began, not in the 1950's, but generations earlier. As such, it is quite possible, sad as it may be, that in the long run the nuclear family is quite untenable as the basic cell in the structure of society. Indeed, the psychological burden placed on each member of such a family may be more than a vast portion of the population is able or willing to bear. There are few of us who can succeed as the almost exclusive male or female role model for our children.

I am not saying that we should try to return to the model of the extended family. Given the economic and social pressures that produced its demise, it would be futile for us to try to resurrect it on any large scale. Nor am I saying that I have a vision of what the future order of the family will be. What I am saying is simply that, if we apply to our analysis of family life in our country the principles of analysis that are being employed by liberation theologians and others elsewhere, we arrive at a much more radical analysis of the causes of the present family crisis than our society is willing to concede.

What is then the role of the church in this situation? Frankly, I do not know. I do know that the early church did not consider itself an aggregate of families, but rather the family of God. And I wonder what would happen if, in our counseling and in our life as a church, rather than take it to be our task to strengthen the nuclear families that are part of our congregations, we took it to be our task to become a family, an extended family playing many of the roles that the old extended family used to play. In many ways, this is the role that Base Christian Communities play in many areas in Latin America. This is particularly true in the situations where families, both nuclear and extended, have been uprooted and decimated by war and violence, such as El Salvador. Visitors to Salvadoran communities, both in exile and in El Salvador itself, repeatedly report that the Base Christian Communities have become a new extended family for people for whom the traditional family linkages have been broken or weakened.

Whatever the case may be, the point I am trying to make is that when one begins along the route of liberation theology and socio-economic analysis, one risks coming to conclusions that one may not like, and that this is something we must be ready to do, not only in our theological inquiry and in our preaching and biblical interpretation, but also in our pastoral counseling and in the entire life of the church.

Finally, still in the context of counseling, we must ask if the practice itself of pastoral counseling, as normally undertaken, is not a further strengthening of the individualism that so undermines the life of the church and its efforts to become a force for liberation. One of the complaints of liberation theology against traditional theology, both liberal and conservative, is that it has not sufficiently taken into account the corporate nature of human existence. This criticism often focuses on some of the ways pastoral counseling is practiced and understood. Even when pastoral counseling is placed in a non-privatistic context, such as in group therapy, most of the issues are dealt with as if sin, guilt and redemption were individual matters.

At this point, what is required is the development of a form of counseling that helps groups deal with what in truth are group realities. For instance, how does a white church, as a whole, deal with the reality and the guilt of racism? In a world marked by gross inequality, how does pastoral counseling help Christians deal with their responsibilities and with the sense that no solution seems to be within reach of the individual or of the church? Naturally, pastoral counseling cannot leave aside or ignore the very private hurts and perplexities of individuals.

But it must constantly be on guard lest concern for that individual's pain and personal problems be set in a privatistic context which is false, and which is also part of the problem and the pain of every individual living in our society. Issues of lifestyle, prejudice, and runaway concentration of capital are not to be left to the field of social ethics or of community organization. They are a fundamental concern of truly holistic pastoral counseling.

The question inevitably arises: All that sounds good; but is it possible? The answer is that it is not only possible but has been done right here in our own backyards. When you stop to think about it, you realize that for a long time many minority congregations have been practicing this. They have not called it pastoral counseling, but that is what it is. During the height of the civil rights movement, Black pastors had to do a great deal of counseling on the grand, communal scale. They had many difficult psychological issues to grapple with. One of these was the deeply rooted feeling of many Blacks that what they had been told about submission was true, that to claim their rights was unchristian, and the ensuing feelings of guilt about their own involvement in the movement. Another was to create the self-assurance and sense of worth needed to be able to respond without violence to the white violence, which was expected, and which did come. Thus, at the very heart of the civil rights movement, particularly in its early stages, was a superb job of pastoral counseling. In thousands of community gatherings, people were able to deal with feelings of guilt and self-hate, and to lay the foundations for a new manner of life, both individual and communal. The problem is not that this was not pastoral counseling. The

problem is that pastoral counseling was so defined that it was very difficult for many of us to recognize what was taking place as falling within that definition.

The same sort of thing is taking place in many *comunidades de base* in Latin America. On occasion, some of the sessions of such *comunidades* appear very much like group therapy sessions. Issues of guilt and depression come to the forefront and are dealt with in a therapeutic manner. The main difference is that in such Latin American gatherings a conscious effort is made to relate those issues to the wider realities of society and its economic and political order.

This sort of counseling, which has been common in other places for some time, will probably become more common and necessary in predominantly white churches in decades to come. The changing world situation, where increasing numbers are demanding --and taking-- their share in the world's bounty, will force the United States to face some drastic changes. Those changes will create serious trauma in traditionally affluent, white churchgoers. In fact, the trauma will be more immediate in the middle classes, who do not yet realize how much their style of life is related to world economic structures that are neither morally nor politically sustainable. The question, then, is, will pastoral counselors deal with the situation in the traditional, privatistic manner, or will they be able to relate their counseling to structural issues in the economic and social order?

Or, on a subject that is no longer a matter of future speculation, but of present tragedy, what sort of counseling are we offering in the context of the present farm crisis? Purely individualistic, or even family-oriented, counseling will simply not do in such a situation. Obviously, one of the great obstacles in the way of the sort of counseling I am suggesting, particularly among middle class white Americans, is that in such circles the open discussion of personal economic matters is surrounded by a greater tabu than sex. The reason why this is so is that we have been taught in thousands of different ways that we are what we produce and what we consume. Until we can get beyond that barrier, both as individuals and as a community of faith, there is little comfort that counseling can offer to the unemployed or the farmer who has lost the farm.

If, as I tried to show yesterday, true liberation preaching can only take place in a community that is experiencing liberation faith in the entire structure of its life, the practice of liberation counseling must go hand-in-hand with liberation preaching.

But enough on counseling. Let us move to other aspects of the life of the church.

As a second example, I would like to look at the question of stewardship. In a consumer society, it should be very clear to all of us that the values by which we truly live are most discernible in how we spend our money. This is a point that is made quite often in stewardship sermons and campaigns. And it is a true point. But it does not go far enough. Even the term "stewardship" is

confusing, for it is usually interpreted in communal terms at the giving end, but in individualistic terms at the end of making money. When we say that "whatever we have is a gift of God," what we usually understand by that "we" is "each one of us." What we really mean is, not that whatever creation has is a gift of God to creation, or that whatever humankind has is a gift of God to humankind. What we really mean is that whatever John, Dick or Mary has is a gift of God to John, Dick or Mary. And, if that is what we mean, it is thoroughly unbiblical and untrue. It is quite possible that whatever John has he has, not because God gave it to him, but because he took it. As a matter of fact, that is what we mean when we speak of a "self-made person." What we mean, in less crass terms, is that here is a person who somehow managed to grab a large share of the earth's bounty and of life's opportunities. The phrase, "self-made person" is at least correct in that it excludes God --and I am certain God wants no part in it. But then we turn around and say that whatever anyone --even that self-made person-- has is a gift from God, to be managed as stewards of God.

Along the same lines, we must be grateful to our Native American friends for having repeatedly pointed out to us the contradiction between our affirmation that "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," and then adding in *sotto voce*, "and I own five thousand acres of it."

Obviously, the mistake in the traditional outline of the stewardship sermon is in the major premise: Whatever you have is a gift of God. No. The prior question must also be asked: There is a possibility that something you have you have, not because God gave it to you, but because

you took it --or because an unjust order in society took it and gave it to you, which amounts to the same.

True stewardship must deal, not only with the expense side of the ledger but also with the income side. Our income itself may be the result of injustice. Or the size of our income may itself be a case of injustice. These are issues with which the church, as the family of God, must grapple. They are not simple issues, nor are they easy ones, for our consumer society tells us that our worth depends on how much we make and on how much we spend. But that is not what justice teaches. Why is it that presbyteries and annual conferences seem to think that it is appropriate and even necessary for them to set a minimum wage for pastors, but seldom is the question raised of a limit at the other end --of setting also a maximum wage?

The practice of radical stewardship --or at least practice for radical stewardship-- must be a part of the life of any congregation in which true liberation preaching is to take place.

Finally, let us look at the educational program of the church. The first point to be made in this context should be quite obvious: We need to be concerned about what is taught in our educational program, and not just with the running of it. The reason why liberation themes sound so strange to many Christian ears is that many of those who have grown up in our congregations, faithfully attending Sunday school, were able to grow up believing that they had a fairly clear understanding of the nature of the Christian faith even though they had heard or

learned very little of the connection between the Gospel and justice. While some of us are trying to preach that connection from our pulpits, in the previous hour, during Sunday school, many of our parishioners have heard and learned a docetic understanding of the Gospel. The solution is not simply to find better curricula materials. That is important indeed. But the root of the problem is that all of us have much to unlearn before we can teach a different understanding of the biblical message. Curricula for unlearning are much more difficult to prepare than curricula for learning, and we shall only begin to prepare them and to find them if we are aware of our desperate need for them.

But even that will only touch the surface of the problem. I said yesterday that the 11 o'clock hour is the most segregated in American life, except for one other. That other hour is the 10 o'clock hour, when congregations already segregated by racial prejudice and apparently unconscious class consciousness, further segregate themselves by age, marital status, and all sorts of likes and dislikes. In few other places are we as able to be with "our kind of people" as we are in Sunday school. And, worst of all, we seem to think that this is the mark of a good educational program.

The problem is that true education for justice requires true encounter with the realities of injustice in our society. The comfortably segregated environment of many of our Sunday schools is hardly the medium in which such education for justice takes place. What we need are educational programs that take into account the hermeneutical circle that is such a central

theme in liberation theology. Again, hermeneutics is not only the business of the pulpit or of the pastor's study. It is one of the central businesses of the entire community of faith.

An educational program that takes the hermeneutical circle into account would, first of all, put us in closer contact with the realities of the underside of society --with poverty, with homelessness, with unemployment. And let us make no mistake about it, the reality of poverty with which we must be in contact is not a theory about poverty or books about it. The reality of poverty is the poor. There is no way to even begin to understand the reality of poverty without active and effective contact and solidarity with the poor. Likewise, the reality of homelessness is not some statistic, grim and true as such statistics may be. The reality of homelessness is the homeless.

Secondly, such an educational program would then help us move along the hermeneutical circle by helping us reflect, as a group and with the presence and participation of such realities, on the structural reasons why they exist. At this point analysis will probably become painful, for we shall inevitably be drawn to the conclusion that we are part of the structures of oppression, that we profit from them, and that our own acquiescence to them is a significant part of our oppression.

Thirdly, our reflection must include an attempt to relate our faith and the entire message of Scripture to such realities and such an analysis. This does not mean simply to find a few Bible

verses that deal with the poor or the hungry. It means also, and above all, to rediscover meanings in the biblical message and faith that are clarified by the presence and experience of those who suffer the worst consequences of injustice.

Fourthly, we must then ask the question: Why were we not able to see such meanings before we engaged in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed? In other words, we must ask the question of the ideological function of our traditional beliefs --understanding here by ideology a set of beliefs that are designed to bolster a particular ordering of society.

Finally, armed with these new understandings, we must close the circle by continuing to engage the poor and the oppressed in solidarity, and thus continuing the process of constant reevaluation and rediscovery of the depths of the Gospel.

Are our present programs of Christian education doing these things? I hardly think so. Are our seminaries doing these things? Not usually. It is true that in some congregations and in some seminaries, efforts are being made in this direction. But still, these efforts are generally experimental in nature and have not yet hit the heart of most of our educational programs, nor the core of most of our seminary curricula. In few seminaries do such experiences attain the level of required courses. In even fewer do they involve the faculty that teaches the traditional "academic" courses. And, although many Sunday schools have classes that deal with these matters, and even some where there is direct contact and dialogue with the poor, such classes

also remain at the level of "electives," and seldom involve more than what amounts to a small interest group.

Such things are beginning to happen. And, as they become more the norm and less the exception, there will be increased possibilities for liberation preaching. Again, such preaching can only be truly such when it takes place within the context of a liberation community of faith, a community whose struggle is so real and so crucial that it will not allow any aspect of its life to be seen as independent of that struggle.

You have invited me here to speak about liberation preaching. As I indicated yesterday, such invitations always arouse in me a certain "hermeneutical suspicion." Part of that suspicion is the danger that liberation theology may become one more consumer item to titillate the consumerism of our society and our church. Some say that liberation theology is a fad. If it has become such in some circles, this is not the fault of liberation theology but of cultural and societal approaches that are able to turn even the struggle of the dispossessed into a consumer item. If, within this context, we approach liberation preaching as an option available to any who would incorporate into their preaching some of the insights of liberation theology, we would have done little more than to encourage the fad. For that reason, just as in the last century Soren Kierkegaard set out to make it more difficult to become a Christian, in order to make it really possible to become a Christian, it would appear that what is needed in our situation is to make it more difficult to become a liberation preacher, precisely in order to make it possible. If

any are willing to embark on this venture, I can assure you that it will be a costly venture. It will not make you a popular preacher. It will not make you a successful pastor. But it may help all of us experience a new excitement about our common faith. And, lest we forget, "the gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life."