



Liberation in a Pastoral Perspective

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When I think about liberation, I unavoidably think about it as a Christian and as a woman and as citizen of the United States who has been profoundly moved by the struggle for liberation in Latin America. In this essay, however, I am writing specifically from the point of view of a pastor, bringing that particular perspective to bear on the issue of liberation in the hope of adding to our understanding of liberation as a theme of the Christian life. In looking at liberation from a pastoral perspective, I will be drawing on my experience as a parish pastor, as a member of a bishop's staff, and currently as a teacher of pastors.

This paper is a response to the problem faced by pastors of rich congregations when they seek to address issues of justice and enlist their congregations in the cause of economic and political liberation of oppressed peoples around the world. Too often such challenges have been ineffective at best and divisive at worst. The particular understanding of pastoral ministry presented here may provide a way for pastors to work constructively with congregational resistance so that their people may become more free to respond to the call to free others.

The paper falls into three parts. First, I define what I mean by *pastor* and identify what is distinctive about the pastoral perspective. Second, I present illustrations of the pastoral perspective on liberation. Third, I draw some implications of the pastoral view of liberation for the practice of ministry with rich and poor Christians.

I. THE PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

For the purposes of this essay the pastor is understood as one who engages in pastoral ministry. Ministry is the service of faithful Christians to the church and to the world so that all people may hear, believe, and have life in Christ. The essence of pastoral ministry, as one part of the whole ministry of the people of God, is the spiritual leadership of a congregation. A pastor is the ordained

leader of a congregation, who, in the capacity of leader, preaches the Word, presides at the Eucharist, and fulfills other functions which help to build the faith and unity of the congregation.

Lay people may have ministries of leadership in the church, and ordained people may be called to non-parish ministries, but neither of these is pastoral ministry by this definition. Lay people preach and teach, and on occasion baptize, but they do not thereby become pastors or develop a pastoral perspective. Lay people may also have a "pastoral" demeanor and superior theological expertise, but lay people are not called by a congregation to preside regularly at the worship of the assembly and at the rites that mark significant passages in members' lives, to

serve as their spiritual leader and guide, and to provide a focus for the community's life and a symbol of their unity. A lay person who is called to such service would cease to be a lay person.

People who do pastoral ministry develop a particular point of view or perspective, a characteristic way of interpreting issues and situations. The slant of the pastoral perspective is determined more by the nature of the relationship between pastors and congregations than it is by the pastor's performance of the pastoral functions of Word and Sacrament, or by the pastor's possession of biblical and theological knowledge and the so called "pastoral" qualities, i.e., gentleness, respect, patience, humility, and industry. Such functions, qualities, and competencies are critical to the practice of pastoral ministry, but they do not distinguish pastoral ministry from other ministries, or the pastoral perspective from other perspectives.

The distinctive perspective that the pastor brings to the consideration of liberation or any other issue is derived primarily from his or her unique role and relationship in the congregation by virtue of ordination and call. That pastoral role and pastoral relationship in the North American Protestant context is shaped by a number of realities:

1. The pastor is accountable to the local congregation which calls and also to the supra-congregational structure of the larger church which ordains—and finally to God who commands obedience.

2. The pastor in relation to the congregation is an authority among equals. He or she is called to lead without "lording it over" the congregation. Legitimate authority ascribed to the pastor is often not sufficient for the task of leadership and must be augmented by authority derived from personal appeal, demonstrable competence, and quantifiable success.

3. The congregation typically is too large to be personal and too small to be formal. The pastor has to be able to relate to members individually, taking into account their diversity and particularities, and at the same time has to be able to foster the unity of the assembly and direct the assembly toward a common mission.

4. The pastor as member of the wider community relates to the congregation in a number of roles other than the distinctively pastoral one. The pastor ideally is integrated into the community and relates to his or her people in a variety of capacities (citizen, neighbor, parent, friend, consumer) over a long period of time. Because of this complex variety of roles in a parish context, pastoral relationships tend to be ambiguous.

5. Pastor and congregation are mutually interdependent. The congregation is dependent on the pastor to perform many of the functions of leadership, especially with regard to Word and Sacrament. The pastor, on the other hand, cannot do his or her ministry apart from the congregation.

Pastoral ministry is by nature mediated ministry; it always happens with and through a concrete group of people called a congregation. A prophet may speak a word from God directly to the world. The pastor's authority to speak God's word, however, is mediated through the congregation. The pastor's ministry is directed in the first place to the congregation and through the congregation to the wider world. The characteristic that distinguishes the pastoral perspective from other perspectives is the primary focus on the local congregation as the essential medium of ministry.

The pastor's distinctive relationship to the congregation is comprehensive and

complicated in ways that make it vulnerable to disruption. If the relationship between pastor and congregation or members of the congregation is disrupted, the flow of authority and the effectiveness of the pastor's ministry will be undermined. The pastor may risk congregational conflict for the sake of the gospel, understood either as right teaching or right practice, but not without also risking the effectiveness of her or his ministry to all or part of the congregation. Other principles may take precedence in a particular situation, but the pastor can never ignore the principle of congregational unity, for which he or she bears primary responsibility.

The complexity of the task of maintaining relationship with and building unity among people close at hand in the congregation may have the effect of compromising the pastor's commitment to the gospel when it requires the pastor to take an unpopular ethical position. The pastoral perspective has often been used as an excuse for maintaining the status quo in places where a challenge for change would be disruptive of pastoral relationships. In the context of the affluent North American parish the biblical call for the liberation of the oppressed represents one such unpopular and potentially disruptive challenge.

The purpose of this paper is to explore more positive uses of the pastoral perspective for understanding the dynamics of liberation, for enabling the liberation of congregations, and for contributing to the liberation of the wider human community through the congregation. Being more explicit about the pastor's primary focus on the immediate community may be a key to more effective ministry in both rich and poor world congregations.

II. THE PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE IN PRACTICE

The following story shows how the development of a pastoral perspective affects a pastor's approach to controversial social issues. Some years ago there was a seminarian, who was a member of the congregation I served, but who seldom attended. He was so sensitive to the pain of the world and to the integrity of the liturgy, that he could hardly bear the trivialities of our Sunday morning worship. He did not hide his disdain for my preoccupation with the daily routine of running a medium size parish, while millions starved and suffered violence all over the world.

page 73

In the course of time, the seminarian completed his studies and was called to a small church in a comfortable little town less than an hour away. From that distance I could watch at irregular intervals as his perspective was transformed by the practice of pastoral ministry. He settled down in the town; he loved the people; he was at the high school football game on Friday nights; he fussed over the newsletter; he visited the sick and dying; and he organized the fall stewardship campaign. As he went about his many tasks, he fairly glowed with enthusiasm and satisfaction. He was aware of the change that had come over him and was a little embarrassed by it. In an attempt to recapture the shreds of his old cynicism, he said to me once, "When it's your own salary you are raising, stewardship is a lot more interesting."

From the outside it looked as though the development of a clear pastoral perspective had blunted the edge of his ethical commitments. He certainly was less directly involved in the causes of peace and justice which had drawn him to seminary in the first place. He had learned from some bad experiences in the first few weeks of his ministry that a new pastor, who has not earned the trust of the congregation, had better not confront controversial issues from the pulpit. He learned through long conversations around the kitchen tables of his members that they too had

thought issues through, even though they may have come to conclusions different from his own. He became increasingly aware of the complexity of ethical issues and the ways in which his members' lives were affected by decisions made in the congregation, in the community, and in financial institutions, multinational corporations, and government agencies hundreds of miles away.

After he had been at this church for a couple of years, leaders from his parish helped him organize a county-wide Ecumenical Peace Day. Seventy-four people participated in classes, lectures, and demonstrations on peace. When I commiserated with him about the disappointing attendance and wondered if it had been worth all the hours of committee meetings that had gone into the planning, he said it would have been worth it even if the day had been cancelled. In the committee meetings and the planning sessions "his" people had caught a vision of what their faith meant in today's world. He was confident that they were making a difference in their world.

The young pastor had learned very quickly that his first pastoral responsibility was to love his congregation. The acquiring of a pastoral perspective changed the focus of his passion, but not the intensity of his passion for justice and peace. His sense of ministry to the whole hurting world came to be focused on and filtered through the specific group of people to whom he was called as pastor. Because his primary focus had shifted from the prevention of war to the formation of peacemakers, he was willing to give himself and others a little more time and tolerance. In a few short years he had not only drawn a number of individuals into the peace movement, but had begun to shape the congregation's self-understanding as people of peace. As a body the congregation would have a greater likelihood of effecting systemic changes for peace than the pastor ever would have had as an individual.

When the Peace Day was over, this pastor rejoiced not only in the fact that the world may have moved one millimeter closer to peace because of his pro-

gram, but also because of the changes he saw occurring in members of his congregation who worked with him. His congregation was not only the medium of a ministry directed toward some greater end. These people had become for him a worthy end for his ministry. Their deepening faith, expanding vision, and growing sense of discipleship, which were by-products of the day's activities, came to be of central importance to the pastor.

We see this same congregational focus in the ministry of Paul. When Paul solicits a gift from one of his congregations for the needy beyond the congregation, he seeks the good of the giver as well as the good of the receiver. In the case of the Philippians, Paul himself is the recipient of their generosity. In his effusive response to their monetary support, he tells the Philippians, "Not that I seek the gift; but I seek the fruit which increases to your credit" (Phil 4:17).

It is a curious comment, which comes dangerously close to Pelagianism. One is tempted to discount it as an expression of Paul's discomfort at being the object of charity. Paul repeats the same sentiment, however, in his exhortation to the Corinthian congregation to contribute generously to the gift for the poor in Jerusalem. His appeal is not only for the well-being of the saints in Jerusalem, but quite pointedly for the well-being of the saints at Corinth:

You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will

produce thanksgiving to God; for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God. Under the test of this service, you will glorify God by your obedience in acknowledging the gospel of Christ, and by the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God in you. (2 Cor 9:11-14)

Paul is not encouraging the faithful at Corinth and Philippi to support worthy causes out of self interest. The rewards he promises for those who give are not personal gains, but the enrichment of the community in the strength of their witness in the world and among the churches. Their generosity is a sign of God's grace working in them which will be the occasion for more people to give greater thanks and praise to God. Paul urges his congregation to think beyond themselves to the needs of others, but he continues to consider their needs and celebrate their gains. However broad his vision and mission grow, Paul never lets his focus wander too far from the specific congregation he is addressing. Even when he is circularizing several congregations to assist in an emergency in a distant part of the empire, even while he is collecting the fruits of faith, his underlying concern is for building up each local congregation in faith. He cares not only that distant saints are liberated from their bondage to poverty, but also that his local congregation learn liberality and enjoy its benefits.

III. LIBERATION FOR AND THROUGH THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

The contemporary cry for political and economic liberation around the world will not be adequately answered by a collection for the poor such as Paul conducted among the congregations. No amount of charity will unlock the cycle of poverty that keeps most of the world's people living at a subsistence level in economic bondage to those who control the wealth. What is required is a funda-

mental, systemic change in the structures of society, which currently are designed to ensure that the rich continue to increase their wealth at any human cost.

We are hearing the cry for liberation as it comes to us in the plaintive whimpers of starving children and the violent outbursts of freedom fighters around the world. But the cry comes first from God, who is the champion and companion of the oppressed, who promises a new order in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The cry goes out to the people of God, compelling them to follow, to work together toward the new age.

The pastor who would enlist his or her congregation in the cause of the poor today is inviting people not only to give, but to change their self-understanding and way of living, to give up their economic advantage, their political dominance, their military superiority. The resistance of congregations is fully commensurate with the threat such radical demands imply. Overcoming such resistance takes a change of heart on the order of a religious conversion.

The task of liberating congregations to liberate those beyond the congregation presents a far more serious challenge to pastoral ministry than Paul's task of collecting alms for Jerusalem. In either case, however, the pastor's primary focus on the congregation is a critical factor. The change of heart liberation requires is much more likely to happen within a pastoral relationship in

which the parishioner feels accepted and trusts the pastor's concern for his or her welfare, as well as for the welfare of the world. The pastor has to believe and be motivated by the belief that the congregation itself needs to be liberated and will benefit from its involvement in the liberation of others. It is in the act of liberality that the congregation's sense of liberation from dependence on material security will be confirmed and enlarged, which will in turn free the congregation for greater acts of liberality.

Pastoral ministry toward liberation of the congregation for participation in the liberation of the world begins with the clear proclamation that liberation is God's will for it and for the world. As Christians, members of the congregation have received liberation from bondage to sin and death as a gift through Jesus Christ. The freedom that is theirs as a gift should express itself in the impulse to set others free, to work with God for the liberation of those in bondage of any kind. Luther said that the tree that has been made good will bear good fruit. Those who have been justified will practice justice and mercy. Those who have become rich through the poverty of Christ (2 Cor 8:9) are called to make others rich spiritually and materially. Liberation is always both a condition that is given and a task to be completed for ourselves and for others.

The pastor of a congregation is also obliged to help members of the congregation to see, for their sake and for the sake of the world. In order for the congregation to be faithful, its members need to open their eyes to see the suffering of the poor of the world, to take in the depth and breadth of the problems that confront them, to perceive the root causes of their oppression, and to face their own implication in the plight of the poor. People do not want to look at such things. Pastors can make it harder for people to open their eyes, if they set themselves over against the congregation and deliver the bad news as an accusation. Pastors can make it easier if they are able to communicate to their parishioners

that the pain of seeing is necessary for their good, for their growth in understanding and faith, for their responsible participation as citizens of their nation and of the world, for their liberation from ignorance and falsehood. As people of God they deserve to know the truth.

A third pastoral task is to help people find concrete ways to respond to the needs they have allowed themselves to see. That will include charity, but more and more the response to the plight of the oppressed needs to take the form of advocacy and political action. The goal of this activity is to relieve immediate suffering and to effect long range changes in the structures of society that will benefit the underclass. In the process of doing something for the wider good, however, the doer is changed for the better. The more engaged one becomes in the struggle of others for liberation, the more one experiences and enhances his or her own sense of freedom, which in turn expresses itself in greater liberality. As a congregation practices its faith through social action, it gains an identity and a heightened sense of unity, which in turn strengthens the congregation to act more boldly. The pastor can encourage his or her people to expend themselves for the sake of the world, knowing that their faith will be deepened by their practice of it, and their witness will be magnified by their action.

Even when structures are resistant to change and the suffering cannot be stopped, the pastor can help both his or her own people and the oppressed of the world beyond by promoting solidarity between rich and poor. Solidarity requires of rich-world Christians that they claim their common humanity with the poor, giving material aid and moral support for the journey where

that is possible, continually communicating to them that they are not alone, that around the world there are allies in the cosmic battle in which they are engaged against the powers of evil.

Rich-world congregations which take the risk to be in solidarity with the poor will find that they gain more than they give. They receive from those who have nothing a continual revelation of reality, of evil at the deepest level, and of hope at its most sublime. God has chosen to reveal the truth about God and about humanity at the point of supreme suffering, on the cross and in all the echoes of the cross in the cries of the poor. Those who do not stand with the poor at the cross do not fully know what it means to belong to humanity or to God. They are the most impoverished of all. The rich live in isolation from the poor at the expense of their own full humanity. The pastor of an affluent congregation will work earnestly to break down those walls because of the love he or she bears for the people being served.

IV. CONCLUSION

Pastors concerned about social issues do not have to abandon their pastoral focus on the local congregation, nor does that focus have to become an excuse for allowing a congregation to remain turned in on itself. I suggest that we do not need to weaken but strengthen that fundamental relationship between pastor and congregation in order for the congregation as well as the world to move toward freedom. Instead of being the problem, the pastoral perspective

may be the key to the effective proclamation of the liberation of all people in Jesus Christ.

In a poor and suffering congregation, the pastoral focus on the immediate community will mean that pastoral ministry will be directed at relieving the suffering and its underlying causes. In the affluent congregations of North America, the pastoral focus on the immediate need of the community will mean helping people to become free to become part of the global struggle for liberation. The pastor has a strong word to speak, but it is always for the sake of the people, of those people in church on Sunday morning. The pastor's congregational focus does not make him or her captive to the congregation's wishes, but rather calls the pastor to address the deepest needs of its members as Christian disciples.

It is all too clear what happens when priests in poverty stricken villages do not focus on the real needs of their congregation, but act as representatives of the dominant class and manipulate the people in their congregations to meet the needs of that class. Pastoral ministry is similarly abusive and ineffective when pastors of affluent congregations do not focus on the real needs of their congregations, but act as direct representatives of the oppressed and manipulate the congregation to meet the needs of the underclass. The danger is that the congregation is used as a means to an end, however noble the end.

The global underclass needs and deserves every possible form of representation. Christian people, including pastors, are called to fulfill that role. Pastors by the nature of their office, however, may need to fulfill that role indirectly, always acting first as representatives of their own people, and in that capacity calling them to greater integrity, witness, generosity, sacrifice, and liberality. The pastor who loves his or her people longs, prays, and works for their freedom to live the Christian life truly, as Paul did for the people of Corinth and Philippi. Those who have been set free long, pray, and work for the liberation of the world. The pastor is always in the middle, loving and serving those close at hand, so that in the end all may be served.

A contemporary eastern European churchman has said, "To love the world as it is is to begin to change it." Nowhere is this more true than the pastoral ministry. The pastor is called to turn a particular corner of the world upside down with the gospel. That world may be an urban slum, a rural village, a blue collar neighborhood, or an affluent suburb. The effect of the gospel may be to raise up in one setting and to cast down in another. But in either case, the task of the pastor is to love that world as it is. For it is only when it has been loved freely as it is, that it is free to become something new. My young pastor friend learned this in his first call. He had the ministry of the Apostle Paul and Jesus Christ for a model.