

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
October 1, 2023

Sometimes in this life, we're lucky enough to take a class that changes our life for the better. For me, it was with a professor named Mary, who I liked so much that I would sign up for whatever she was teaching even if I had no idea how the topic might fit into my life. I remember sitting in her seminar class on the first day of the semester—this was one of those courses that met only once a week for three hours—while she patiently went through the syllabus. The title of the course was Liberation Theology, but I don't think I knew really what either of those words meant, and I certainly didn't know how they were related to one another.

Because it was a once-a-week course, we had a lot of logistics to work through—when the midterm would be, who would be presenting on what days, what happened when our course landed on a holiday, and what the rules were for missing class for illness. By the time we went through all the details of the whole semester, we had been working on little details for over sixty minutes. Mary checked in with the class to see how we were all doing, and one of the students complained that we spent so much time on what he called “housekeeping.”

Mary, a bit angry, replied “have you ever kept a house? I'm guessing you haven't.” She then launched into a lecture on the dignity of labor, the ways that domestic work is undervalued in our country and often relegated to a second class of work, and the ways in which her course would focus on the lives and stories of those people who were often ignored by the centers of power in our country. She additionally went on to explain that domestic work is often done in our country by people with uncertain immigration status, often from Central and South America, who are not provided the same labor protections, such as they are, as American citizens. It was quite the teaching moment.

Mary's entire class focused on a religious movement in the 1960s and 70s in Central and South American countries like El Salvador, Peru, and Uruguay that we have come to call Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology focused on the idea that the attention of all Christians, and indeed on the entire church, should be on the most vulnerable members of society—those whose poverty is so extreme that it is difficult to imagine in a country as wealthy as ours. Catholic priests working among poor base communities of Christians in a time of horrendous income inequality started to write about the ways in which Jesus, time and time again, reached out to the margins of society rather than into the middle of it. And, in fact, usually when Jesus moves into the center of society, it is with a rebuke or admonition to remember the poor.

Liberation Theology is not as much in vogue now as it was when I was a student in Mary's class. Now, contemporary thinkers have taken the theoretical framework of the liberation theologians and have expanded it to include Black theology in America as well as feminist and womanist theologies all around the world.

But why is any of this important, and why should you care? I think that we should care because in today's Gospel, I can see how much Jesus cares. Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Those people who are reviled, who are cast out, who are ignored, and who are deemed disposable by a sometimes cruel world are exactly the people that Jesus is taking the time to place at the center of his ministry. This might make you uncomfortable. I know it certainly makes me uncomfortable. Because when I look at my position in society, I start to think that Jesus would have some difficult questions for me. Are you, Ian, doing your best to live in a way that is in solidarity with the people in society who are the most vulnerable? Are you, Ian, releasing the fair share of your wealth so that all of God's children can flourish? Are you, Ian, using your position to keep the attention of the church and of your areas of influence focused on the needs of the most vulnerable? And if I had to answer honestly (and I would hope that if Jesus was asking me a question I would answer honestly), I would have to say "sometimes."

Sometimes I am good at making decisions for the needs of the poor, and sometimes I am not. I want to do better, but if I am honest, to do better sometimes requires some assistance from my community and some inspiration from my God. The world has told me that there are some things that I need more of. HGTV has told me that my house isn't nice enough. A culture of over-work has told me that I need to work hard but also play hard: read, expensively. And a strangely disposable economy tells me that my old phone, my old shoes, my old sofa, and my old suit need to be replaced right away so that I will be happier. But, not only are all of those things lies, they negatively impact the lives of the poor.

And, so, when Jesus comes to take the disciples to task, I'm pretty sure he is talking to me. And when Jesus points to the holiness of the sex workers and the tax collectors, it is a wake-up call for me, and perhaps it is a wake-up call for you. I never doubt that God loves me, warts and all. And I never doubt that God loves you, warts and all. Even so, I believe that God is requiring us to take that divine love that has been so lavishly poured into our lives and to turn that love into liberation for those on the edge—the trans kid looking for the phone number for the suicide hotline, the domestic worker trying to avoid ICE, the single parent working two jobs to make ends meet, the differently abled person trying to navigate a world not made with their needs in mind.

Jesus can sometimes talk about the things of the spirit. But today, I think he is talking about the real needs of real people. And so, the question for us is this: knowing that we are called to work for the liberation of the most vulnerable, how will we act? Amen.