"For All Flesh That Suffer[illegible] Has God Close At Hand": Liberation Theology and Gay, Lesbian, [illegible]isexual, and Transgender Communities."

by Ellen Grigsby

Everyone who loves is begotten of God and has knowledge of God. Those who do not love have known nothing of God, for God is love.—1 John 4:7-8.

Scholars often highlight the importance of the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Bishops Medellin Conference in 1968 when analyzing the origins and early development of liberation theology. However, the God of liberation theology is a living, active, and engaging God revealed to peoples beyond any boundaries represented by institutions and religions traditions. African American theologian James H. Cone called upon believers to embrace this open-embrace of liberation theology when, in 1984, he pointed out that God seems to delight in making God's presence manifest in "many colours, binaries, and unexpected places."[1] With Cone as our teacher, perhaps we should not be surprised to see that the theology which speaks from "bleeding wounds," as Leonardo Boff describes it[2], names the hurt of many whose lives may seem far removed from the context and times of liberation theology's birth. Indeed, the theology which talks from and about the "situatedness" of the poor as a location both of oppression and as well as an especially illuminating place from which to experience God's abundant grace, names the faith of many who suffer discrimination today, but who trust that they, too, will be delivered.

This article discusses one of the late developments within liberation theologies: Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (g/l/b/t) liberation theology. G/l/b/t liberation theology draws upon and attempts to develop many of the hermeneutical interpretative, christological, and praxis oriented dimensions of Latin American, African American, Asian, and feminist liberation theologies. Like those liberation theologies which came before, g/l/b/t liberation theologies represent diverse perspectives and internal creative tensions. For instance, theologians disagree on the place of Scripture in a liberationist Christianity inclusive of g/l/b/t people. As discussed in section III below, a number of g/l/b/t theologians view Scripture as unambiguously supportive of all two-centers of liberation, while others find problems in looking to Scripture to address directly the specific oppression of g/l/b/t people.

That analysis will examine three interrelated themes within g/l/b/t liberation theologies, especially as these themes connect with the earlier waves of liberation theology. The article makes no effort to be comprehensive nor does it try to smooth over differences and diversity within the liberation writings it addresses. This essay does not seek to be objective about or distant from the subject matter. I write as a believer, grounded in my particular experiences, in women and in power

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that this is one of the challenges that liberation theology presents. In a section entitled "Speaking of God in Latin America" in his book on Job, Gutierrez is unprivileged in articulating a central question of liberation theology: "What words are we to use in telling those who are not even regarded as persons that they are the daughters and sons of God?"[4] Chilean theologian Pablo Richard also emphasizes the God-centeredness of liberation theology. Explains Richard, "The theology of liberation is not a theological reflection on liberation, but rather a reflection on God in a context of liberation."[5] Those who fail to see this distinction may not grasp the essence of the theology because they may not see the source of its power to transform. The first type of reflection of which Richard speaks (the focus on liberation per se rather than God) can be more readily contained, and thus dominated, by defenders of the status quo; after all, it doesn't require a great deal of political acumen for anyone wishing to do so to adopt a strategy of discrediting a liberation movement by paying it off as mere politics disguised as religion. Whether one is accused of having a Marxist agenda or a homosexual one, a voice for liberation theology is at risk for being charged with serving as a front for some kind of aberrant politics. What is not understood by those who see liberation theology from the first perspective noted by Richard is that the theology is truthfully a theology and is given definition by faith in a God revealed as Liberator. The political dimensions of what one does with that understanding are consequences, not foundations. Indeed, God-centredness is captured in the phrase "faith-based"—faith is the base/ the foundation and politics is built up from the base.

Herein we finds a source of liberation theology's transformative promise. Consider: what if a community begins to believe in a God who is bigger than conventional boundaries would have us accept, a God whose divinely created order is more diverse than the principalities define as normal, a God who is more loving than the power structure regards as warranted, and a God whose grace is more radical than our imaginations are big? How could this faith be contained? Make no mistake about it, Richard argues. That which the powers—including the defenders of the status quo in the churches—fear from "liberation theology is not that liberation be spoken of, but that theology be spoken of" and "that God and the reign of God will be spoken of, and that one of this experience of God may cause a judgment or questioning of the meaning of the entire church."[6]

Indeed, what could be more profoundly de-legitimizing to systems of political/economic/social control than the presence of a Spirit-filled community worshipping a God who wills the liberation of all? What could be more threatening to those who seek to perpetuate domination than a community of believers to whom is revealed the God known to the prophet Amos, that is, the God who calls on God's people to seek an end to systems that "oppress the poor [and]. . . crush the needy" and promises judgment against those who continue to oppress the marginalized (4:1)? When if our theological reflections lead us to understand God as God was revealed to Micah: "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8). What would become of empire if Christians, because the friends of Jesus as Jesus has

will wanted us to be, according to the Gospel of John, 15:13-15. When if we claimed our friendship with Jesus and took up his ministry, just as Jesus took up the teachings of Isaiah, as revealed in the Gospel of Luke:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release
> to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19).

Readers of *Radical Grace* may know individuals who, upon understanding God and Jesus in this way, came to see a disconnect between what a) powerful governments enact as policy and b) what God envisions for Creation. Indeed, faith-based activism on such matters as militarization of space, NAFTA, and Operation Hold the Line draws strength from faith in a God who removes what has been taken and lifts up those who have been beaten down.

G/l/b/t theologians might ask us to think about the following possibilities. What happens when the same God is revealed to us and we reflect on this God from the "situatedness" of g/l/b/t people in the U.S? What would release to the captives look like for women, men, and youth who a) have no federal civil rights protection as g/l/b/t people despite Justice Department reports documenting anti-gay hate crimes and attitudes[7]; b) know that only 11 states and the District of Columbia have state/district laws having discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity[8]; c) lack the legal right to marry one's beloved upon the attainment of adulthood; and d) experience vilification and condemnation through accusations of being abnormal/evil/predatory/abusive/anti-family despite statements to the contrary from the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics?

II. How Do We Understand Captivity?

Latin American liberation theologians have named sin[illegible] as the root of oppression. Sins/real sins of inequality and economic domination generate systemic oppression, haves and have nots, privilege and marginalization. Liberation theology's central concept of "the preferential option for the poor" emerges, the work emerging that God's specific intention is to care for the orphan, the widow, the stranger, and the poor.

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Exodus 23: 23-24 and in the Pentateuch, e.g.) God draws upon the attention to God's love for those who have been harmed. The cause Bible is marked by the love of God favoring the weak and the mistreated in human history. Gutierrez believes " If so, captivity is sin, not the will of God.

Developing this theme, g/l/b/t liberation theologian Carter Heyward draws explicitly on Nicaraguan liberation theology in attempting to speak her own truth as a lesbian Christian in the U.S. If structural oppression is a violation of Creation, for the Christian experiencing (g/l/b/t or any other) systemic domination, suffering may feel acutely connected with the suffering of Jesus insofar as Jesus suffered ultimate harm from the empire. Similarly, the humiliated and beaten Jesus is the Jesus of South African theologian Gabriel M. Setiloane:

> Here like us He is, this Jesus of Nazareth,
> Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon, mocked,
> Dressed by His own, and chased like a thief in the night.
> Despised and rejected like a dog that has fleas,
> For NO REASON."[9]

The Jesus who feels abandoned by God is a Jesus known perhaps by many g/l/b/t Christians. Some, like United Church of Christ minister Frances McCall Tigay, may go through long periods of believing the church people who teach that homosexuality is inherently evil and may conclude that "[m]ybe God doesn't have a place for the real me."[10] In such cases, to be defined as outside the body of Christ is to feel dead. Yet, no matter at once the opposite is to assume the call of the Liberator who calls His friend out of the tomb and out of the burial clothes and into new life. Heyward explains it this way: "While the Body of Christ is broken in every act of violence, greed, or bigotry, it is rising in every act of solidarity with those who are oppressed."[11] Praxis, activism, struggle become resurrection.

III. How Does the Bible Relate to G/L/B/T Liberation Theology?

In *The Gospel in Solentiname*, Ernesto Cardenal writes about how one member of a Bible study group witnessed to Cardenal and the other group members that Scripture is liberating. "It's by lies that the exploiters have made themselves masters of everything," the man explained. "That's why the Word of God came to free us from this deceit."[12]

A number of g/l/b/t liberation theologians have made similar arguments by suggesting that a close reading and careful translation/interpretation of the Bible from a contextual/historical perspective uncovers misreadings that have been used to attack g/l/b/t people. Just as many Christians signed with sincere (albeit poor) use of the Bible to perpetuate racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism, today many liberationists assert what they view as misuse of Scripture to punch injustice and hatred of g/l/b/t communities. Indeed, when one considers that a passage like Leviticus 18:22,[13] was used by church leaders who wanted to defend

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theory, it is not surprising that the story of Sodom, for example, is more likely to be presented as a condemnation of g/l/b/t people by those who want the church to oppose us than as a story about inhospitality, even though later sections of the Scriptures suggest the story was, indeed, about inhospitality.[14]

Theologians and scholars seeking from this interpretative perspective generally make at least one of these points:

- The Bible is related to the historical contexts of those individuals attending to it; hence, some sections of the Bible reflect concerns specific to those ancient contexts but are not necessarily to be applied in literal specificity to our time. Each reader must, with the assistance of his/her faith community and conscience, decide what is prophetic and calling us to God and God's work today. Thus, it is questionable to draw our Biblical passages regarding prohibitions on same sex activity and say that faith "requires" a literalist reading of those passages if we don't explain why faith does not require a similar, literalist reading of other passages (e.g., prohibitions on charging interest on money; instructions to forgive debts, to confine "unclean" women, to avoid wearing clothes made of different textiles, require men to sacrifice animals as part of religious observance, etc.)[15]
- Jesus never said a word about homosexuality, as revealed through the Bible.[16]
- The kind of same sex acts condemned in the Bible are same-sex acts which involve prostitution, cultic practices, child abuse, community separation from surrounding cultures, dishonesty, exploitation, and/or violence. Importantly, the Bible says nothing about homosexuality as the word is used today to describe a consensual, respectful, loving, honest, nurturing, caring relationship between two adults.[17]
- The Bible has an overall theme of grace which knows no boundaries and the Bible speaks of a loving God who is God-revealing through time and across cultures; love of God and neighbor are the two major commandments of this God; communion/community-building through love is the will of God and this (not conforming g/l/b/t people) should be the work of the church.[18]

While not disagreeing necessarily with the above arguments, g/l/b/t theologian Mr. Gary David Comstock, nonetheless, emphasizes personal faith experience over Scripture as the basis of spirituality. Furthermore, Comstock finds Jesus' silence on gays to be disturbing. "I cannot imagine that we were not present on the mount of Calvary and I do not take comfort from Jesus' apparent neutrality

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Indeed, a theology which takes embodiment seriously learns from what it felt from living in a body as well as what is revealed in Scripture and taught in faith communities. Herein is found one of the spirituality praxis connections in g/l/b/t liberation theology. As Richard Cleaver expresses it, "Because our bodies and what we do with them are what our oppressors hate, our bodies are where we must begin."[19] The Good News is that God is not author of the slander against our bodies. The state and the powers may call our bodies evil and unclean, but they don't have the last word for the g/l/b/t friends of Jesus. The Good News assures us that, as we are resurrected by the Spirit, we are resurrected as part of a covenant community which is home to Spirit-filled bodies. The Good News is that we are made for enjoying the gifts of an abundantly generous God. I believe this is the God revealed to the Psalmist:

> O lord, you have searched me and known me. . .
> For it was you who formed my inward parts;
> You knit me together in my mother's womb. . .
> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
> Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
> My frame was not hidden from you,
> When I was being made in secret,
> In your book were written all the days that were formed for me;
> When none of them as yet existed (Psalm 139).

As we love rather than hate, as we embrace community rather than enforce the isolation of closets, as we refuse the lies rather than stand in silence, as we share the gifts rather than hide them, we offer the same testimony of faith that Cardenal heard in the Bible study group in Solentiname: "the Word of God came to free us."

Ellen Grigsby is a volunteer with the CAC and is a member of the CAC's Board. She is also Chaplain Coordinator of the Southwest Chapter of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns.

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Cancelled, But Not Silenced

by Kathleen O'Malley

Our internship is a powerful program, calling people to live gospel values grounded in a contemplative practice. It is designed to teach participants the practice of contemplative prayer, as well as equip them to grace and justice issues, while inviting them to participate in creating the "kindom" of heaven on earth. It is a potent invitation to follow the social teachings of the Catholic Church, but often it is not so child- as some who have expressed interest. Since coming here, I have had a chance to see what this means has generated on the road, years to people

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I'm a [illegible] and I work professor and have known as well as anyone that I will be unjust, hip, and cheap.

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