

“Jesus Shifts the Balance of Power”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

In part of my journey with the global church I was privileged to teach Japanese Christian history in Japanese. The unusual position of being a Westerner teaching another's history, one that traversed the contested terrain of empire, colonialism, and Christianity in Asia, was not lost on me. I remain grateful for colleagues who entrusted me with that task, because it kept before me many of the issues this series has been attempting to grapple with. Christianity arrived in Japan on August 15, 1549, the Feast of the Assumption, with Jesuit missionaries traveling aboard trading ships of the Portuguese crown. This linkage between empire and Christianity is also what took Spanish ships bearing mendicant orders to the Americas during the same period. The background of this Western advance around the world was led by the age of discovery with the crucial support of Western Christianity. In 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull *Dum Diversas* (Until different), which authorized the European invasion of Africa and the perpetual enslavement of its peoples. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI essentially divided the globe in half between Spain and Portugal, with the papal bull *Inter Caetera* (Among other [works]), setting in motion what would become the conquest, colonization, and mission to the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

As I think about many aspects of history that I was never really taught in school, it has become apparent that Western cultural patterns of thought have often selectively excluded parts its own history that though in plain view, are often thought to be invisible. The history of empire, missions, and the Americas cannot be addressed without thinking about the tragic enslavement of Africans, and the continuing enslavement of the modern world to systems of power that perpetuate racism and prejudice toward people of color. These issues were always on my mind as I gave voice through teaching to the history of nation other than my own that also shared in the colonial history of this period.

This week's meditation comes from the writings of Dwight N. Hopkins, Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago, who witnesses to how Jesus has shifted the balance of power away from enslavement to sin and evil, to the new freedom experienced in the grace of Jesus. Dr. Hopkins writes,

Black theology of liberation believes in a relationship between God's freeing activity in the African American community and that same liberating activity documented in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures...At the foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures is a continuous story about how Yahweh heard, saw, and delivered oppressed Hebrew slaves from bondage to liberation.

Hopkins sees the biblical significance of the emancipation of Jewish people from slavery in Egypt as a genuine freeing of people who were unjustly enslaved for the economic benefit of their Egyptian rulers. Hopkins writes “Yahweh opted for the poor and decided consciously to listen to, and see, and change the course of human history by cementing the divine will to a single purpose.” The single purpose of God's salvation history is the ongoing liberation of broken human community from its enslavement to sin and evil - the effects of which have resulted in human beings continuing to be enslaved to systems of power that oppress, rather than empower the weak. For Hopkins, freedom from sin is not an abstract spiritual matter, rather, freedom in Christ is about real physical and material freedom for the poor and oppressed. The experience of God's grace also offers liberation to human beings who have participated in oppressive systems of power, thereby offering healing, and creating a new global human community in the divine image - the body of Christ, the global church.

By drawing on Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46), Hopkins makes it clear that Jesus' followers and his body the church are to become servants of "the least of these." To be a follower of Jesus, engaged in the self-denial of carrying the cross means living for others and working to eradicate systems of injustice that, though in plain sight, continue to be the invisible to many. Hopkins takes the Christianity of dominant Western culture to task writing that Christianity has often been an "abstract 'spiritual' religion, which primarily encouraged individuals to gaze at the heavens while systems of greed, racism, and war enslaved the spirits, souls, and bodies of victims on earth." Jesus' parable in Matthew 25 keeps God's option for the poor and the care of "the least these" squarely in front of all of us who have the power and authority to work with the God of scripture for justice.

However, concern for "the least of these" is more than simply addressing local problems; it is also global in scope because the history of the West is tied to the history of the advance of Western technological and commercial civilization. This advance of the West is a subtle and neocolonial continuation of historical Western colonialism. Quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., Hopkins writes,

"We in the West must bear in mind that the poor countries are poor primarily because we have exploited them through political and economic colonialism. Americans in particular must help their nation repent of her modern economic imperialism." King teaches us that the conscience of an "awakened activist" cannot remain satisfied with a shortsighted focus on local problems, if only because she or he "sees that local problems are all interconnected with world problems."

Hopkins argues "Jesus shifted the balance of power from the realm of evil to the realm of freedom, thereby making the victory of the oppressed assured." This shift of power relations with the world began in Jesus who "emptied himself taking the form of a servant being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7) so that humanity might know that Christ Jesus not only stands with the weak, but that Jesus intentionally gave up the throne of heaven for the cross of Calvary. Jesus did this so that human beings might finally see a way to shift the power structures in the world toward the real freedom that grace makes possible. Jesus' Parable of Matthew 25 is meant to remind his followers about the utter seriousness of the struggle between good and evil involved in caring for the poor and hungry, incarcerated and homeless, the sick, the outcast, the foreigner, and all people in need – black, white, and every other ethnicity.

For Hopkins the significance of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is they contain the God who liberates the poor and oppressed, who shifts the balance of power in the world, and creates a Christian community that *must work* for "the least of these" if it is to be counted among the sheep. The universal claims (theological, economic and intellectual) of the West only take on a universal authority to the degree that Christianity serves with Christ in the world among the weak, rather than on the side of the powerful who serve their own interests. In the kingdom of God, the strong are to help the weak.

Hopkins describes the church in a global world as walking with Christ upon stormy seas:

To limit our vision only to the rough waves of domestic race relations and poverty would be like seeing only Jesus' baptism in the calmness of the river Jordan but not comprehend the Christian mandate that we must walk also with him on the rough seas of Galilee throughout the world.

My global service taught me that we *can walk* with Jesus on "the rough seas of the world" by getting out of our cultural boats to walk where Jesus walks with the poor, the oppressed, the mistreated, and all people – black, white, and of every ethnicity. Jesus has forever changed the balance of power in the world, casting out fear, so that the storms of evil and oppression in the world will never sink those who walk with Jesus and serve "the least of these." Amen.

Week 10 midweek meditation readings:

(Excerpts) “Black Theology of Liberation” by Dwight N. Hopkins

Black theology of liberation believes in a relationship between God’s freeing activity in the African American community and that same liberating activity documented in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. In contrast to the dominant ideas about theology, which claim to offer impartial thinking or talking about God, black theology sees and experiences the spirit of freedom clearly on the side of the African American poor. Biblical stories provide examples of God siding with oppressed people. And when they, the majority of the world, are able to practice spiritual and material freedom, then the minority groups who have a monopoly on most resources on earth will also have a chance to be free from their sin of keeping almost all of God’s resources for themselves. Dominant theologies say they are universal. But they really wear a mask to hide the domination of the few over the many. Black theology of liberation states openly its leaning toward the majority of the world in order to work with the spirit of freedom for all.

At the foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures is a continuous story about how Yahweh heard, saw, and delivered oppressed Hebrew slaves from bondage to liberation.

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come [Moses], I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. (Exod. 3:6-11)

The biblical emancipation was not only freeing the invisible spirits of the slaves but also the freeing of real workers who were real slaves to the ruling class, whose purpose was the accumulation of profit based on the forced and unjust labor of working, oppressed humanity. The issue of poverty, therefore, stands at the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures. Poverty, as the result of injustice, cries out from the pages of the divinely inspired writings. Of all the classes, sectors, and strata in biblical times, Yahweh opted for the poor and decided consciously to listen to, and see, and to change the course of human history by cementing forever the holy will to a single purpose. This purpose was the freeing of broken humanity from sin by working with the poor on earth. Because Yahweh’s being and work are liberation, Yahweh, out of divine love for the victims of oppression, set forth the divine purpose for humanity... (pp. 23-24)

Finally, Jesus Christ offers love, liberation, and salvation for all humanity who accept the gospel and side with the poor. Jesus Christ’s work of love, liberation, and salvation shows itself among particular poor communities. And in those communities or struggles for full humanity we see Christ’s universal and the particular, the spiritual and the physical, and God’s salvation history and human history all come together in specific movements of the oppressed. Black theology of liberation and Third World liberation theologies agree that all of humanity is freed when the majority of the world, who are poor and marginalized, are freed... (p. 180)

In a word, an introduction to a black theology of liberation draws us into increased intellectual pursuits and a more practical faith grounded in justice. However, this is not merely a subjective justice, but a faith and vision to work with the divine will of liberation. The God of freedom, Jesus Christ the liberator, and the empowering Holy Spirit are manifest in what it means to be black and Christian today. The ultimate challenge to realize the full humanity of all – anchored in a focus on the least in the African American community – is the development of a way of being black in the world such that we produce a more comprehensive faith and practice for ourselves and for our children. The Spirit of hope,

determination, and liberation continues to move African Americans. The world didn't make that Spirit, and this world can't take it away (p. 202).

(Excerpt) "Keeping the Dream Alive" by Dwight N. Hopkins (p. 53-67).

The nature of the Christian church does not define itself by worldly possessions and materialistic acquisitions. In fact, in the list of his own earthly achievements, [Dr.] King does not detail his Nobel Peace Prize, his many speaking and preaching engagements, his prestigious degrees, or his books and articles. In contrast, he hopes the living will remember him for his lifelong service to the physically poor and to society's powerless victims. Again, the nature of the church is to serve and empower the people, even if (in the case of exceedingly wealthy churches) serving implies sharing power equally with the poor.

King based the servant trait of the Christian church on the Bible. Specifically, he refers to the passage beginning at Matthew 25:31. Here Jesus uses the parable about the ultimate judgment day, when specific criteria deny or permit passage into heaven. All of humankind faces Jesus on the throne and awaits either permission to enter or relegation to hell or prolonged condemnation. On the left, Jesus places the goats – those who pursued an earthly lifestyle of materialistic, profit-oriented activity. In this crowd one discovers those who placed profit before people, the value of things above human value. Here, too, one meets all those so-called Christians who preached an abstract "spiritual" religion, which primarily encouraged individuals to gaze at the heavens while systems of greed, racism, and war enslaved the spirits, souls, and bodies of victims on earth.

On the right hand, Jesus placed all the sheep and gives them access to heaven because they had been faithful servants to the world's physically poor: people without food to eat or water to drink, people incarcerated or homeless, people sick or without clothes, immigrants to a strange land. King wanted the Christian church to stand with the sheep. As Jesus states in the parable: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these by brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). What the Christian church does to society's poor equals what is done to Christ...

Consequently, the church must help in this deliverance by letting society's victims hear that a radical transformation has already occurred with the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Specifically, the coming of Jesus meant deliverance from evil had taken place. If deliverance into the realm of Jesus' own liberation has occurred for the poor, then the church must aid the poor in their own deliverance. Put differently, Jesus shifted the balance of power from the realm of evil to the realm of freedom, thereby making victory of the oppressed assured. Though a historical shift has taken place in terms of guaranteeing Jesus' victory for "the little ones" on earth, the victims must allow this already ultimate deliverance to empower them toward making this liberation. The Christian church has a role in this process; it proclaims and helps organize deliverance...

Moreover, the anointing of "the spirit of the Lord" commissions us to proclaim the good news of freedom. God's loving freedom had become our freedom because Jesus' victory over oppression has opened up a new world where everlasting life begins now (John 3:16). This spirit calls on theology to speak with, for, and to those who have no voices. It calls on theology to say the gospel of freedom for a full individual and collective life reigns now for our fellow citizens who need our help and, in fact, for our fellow citizens around the entire globe. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the prophetic nature of speaking the truth about Christian spiritual anointing: "We are called," King proclaimed, "to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation"...

Moreover, Dr. King understood the marriage between United States violence abroad and unjust economic investments: “We in the West must bear in mind that the poor countries are poor primarily because we have exploited them through political and economic colonialism. Americans in particular must help their nation repent of her modern economic imperialism.” King teaches us that the conscience of an “awakened activist” cannot remain satisfied with a shortsighted focus on local problems, if only because she or he “sees that local problems are all interconnected with world problems.”

And if one bears the cross of Christ, one has to assume politically a systemic analysis on international relations because injustice and evil at home will never cease until injustice and evil abroad cease. To limit our vision only to the rough waves of domestic race relations and poverty would be like seeing only Jesus’ baptism in the calmness of the river Jordan but not comprehend the Christian mandate that we must walk also with him on the rough seas of Galilee throughout the world.

Reading recommendations:

Hopkins, Dwight N., *Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999.

Hopkins, Dwight N., “Keeping the Dream Alive” in *I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America*. Edited by James Echols, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

Dwight Nathaniel Hopkins (1953-) is the Alexander Campbell Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Born in Richmond, Virginia, Hopkins graduated from Harvard University (B.A.), from Union Theological Seminary, New York (M.Div., M.Phil., Ph.D.), and earned a second Ph.D. from University of Cape Town, South Africa. He also holds an Executive MBA from Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston. Dr. Hopkins is an ordained American Baptist minister, and is the senior editor of the Henry McNeil Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion for Orbis Books. Hopkins works in the area of constructive theology with contemporary models of theology, liberation theologies (black and other third-world forms), and East-West cross-cultural comparisons. He uses multidisciplinary approaches to the academic study of religious thought (cultural, political, and economic). He was awarded the honorary recognition of Professor Extraordinarius in the Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology at the University of South Africa in Pretoria. He is married to Dr. Linda E. Thomas, Professor of Theology and Anthropology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.