

Subversive Memory

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The logo for AETH (Asian Ethical Theology) features a stylized 'A' composed of multiple overlapping triangles in shades of yellow and purple. Below the 'A' is the acronym 'AETH' in a light purple, sans-serif font.

AETH

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John 8:31-33

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'You will be made free'?"

It is customary, on an occasion such as this, to begin by saying that it is a pleasure to be here. But, frankly speaking, I would much rather be there, sitting among you, listening to Dr. Villafañe. Unfortunately, as you have already been told, he is unable to be among us for health reasons. Unfortunately for him, because he is ill. Unfortunately for me, because I have to appear before you on such short notice. And unfortunate for you, who get me instead of him.

I cannot really take Dr. Villafañe's place; nor do I have much of an idea what he was planning to say. But in any case, I invite you to look with me at the passage that has been read, which includes the verse he had selected: "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," and which, as he correctly suggested in his title, has a subversive dimension..

That verse by itself is well known. Perhaps too well known, since we have turned it into a platitude about the notion that knowledge is the basis of freedom, and therefore into a justification for education and for educational institutions.

But when you look at what immediately follows those well-known words, the text takes an unexpected twist. Some of the Jews who had believed in him, say: “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean when you say, ‘You will be made free’?”

“We have never been slaves to anyone.” Really? What about your captivity in Egypt, when you had to make bricks to build homes in which others would dwell? And what about the exile in Babylon when you sang the Lord's song in a foreign land? Really? And what about the times when you were conquered by the Philistines, and by the Amorites, and later by the Syrians, and now even in our day by the Romans?

Memory can deceive. But memory's deceit is not accidental. It has an agenda. Some years ago, I was at the General Conference of our United Methodist Church. I do not remember exactly what was being discussed--I believe it was something about the war in Vietnam. But I do remember that I was in the back of the hall, talking with two friends, one a Chicana from Texas and the other a Cherokee from Oklahoma. In the middle of the debate, a participant gave a very emotional patriotic speech--so emotional that we ceased our conversation to listen to him. At the end, he shouted his conclusion: “I am proud that my country, this country that so many criticize, has never, never, never, taken land from anyone.”

He said this while standing on land stolen from the Cherokees. And even worse, he truly believed what he said. What a strange thing memory is!

Yet not so strange, when we realize that memory also has an agenda. The reason why that good, God-fearing United Methodist gentleman at General Conference could not

remember certain things is that such memory would be subversive of the present order. The reason why those good, honest, Jesus-believing Jews in the Gospel of John could not remember certain things was that such memory, and especially the promise of freedom that Jesus spoke, would be subversive to their existing order.

When they told Jesus, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone,” their odd and forgetful memory had an agenda. They were not really concerned with what took place in Egypt back in the days of Moses, nor with what happened in Babylon during the exile. They were concerned with what was happening right there and then. Palestine, God's promised land, had been conquered by Rome, which in turn brought other promises. To listen to talk of slavery and freedom might well seem subversive. They must distance themselves from such talk. Hence their response: “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.”

The problem is that without memory there can be no praise. A people who has forgotten the Exodus can no longer sing with the Psalmist, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good... who divided the Sea in two, and made Israel pass through the midst of it.” A people who forgets the exile in Babylon cannot sing to the God who opens a highway in the wilderness and makes the desert flourish. A people without memory cannot properly praise God.

And, even worse, when the people lose their memory they also lose their obedience. That is why it is stated in the Law of God: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there, therefore I command you to do this.”

In a way, that is what theological education is all about. It is about restoring, and celebrating, and reinterpreting, the memory of the people of God. The memory of what God has done for us in the past, especially in Jesus Christ; and the memory of what God has promised to do in the future, the Reign of God. Between these two memories, there is the memory of the various pilgrimages that have brought us to this place and to this hour. And that too is part of theological education, for that is part of what the church is.

Yet for too long that memory has been truncated. It has been truncated by denominational and confessional agendas, and hence the call for a more ecumenical approach to such disciplines as church history and biblical hermeneutics. It has been truncated by male-centered agendas, and hence the call for more feminine voices and perspectives. And it has also been truncated by culture, class, and race, and hence the call for a more inclusive community of theological dialogue.

The Hispanic Theological Initiative is part of that call and of the response to it. For too long, our memory has not been part of the formative memory of the Christian church and of theological education. One example suffices: When I studied Church history, with some of the best professors of the time, I was led to believe that the most important event that took place in the XVIth century was the Protestant Reformation. And yet that very XVIth century saw the birth of a worldwide church, and as part of that process, the birth of this mixed people whom we now call Hispanics. And I venture to say that the jury is still out as to which of those two events will in the long run prove to be more important for the history of Christianity.

We come to this community--we come to the theological community at large--with our own memory. It is in part a memory of what we have received from others. But it is also a memory we wish to share with others. It is a strange memory. It is a memory of a race that is not a race--a race composed of people coming from Europe, and from America, and from Africa, and even from Asia--and therefore a race whose memory and whose presence may well prove to be subversive to the very presuppositions of the racism that we all deplore, and yet remains so prevalent. It is the memory of a nation that is not a nation; of people who, like myself, grew up with talk of two motherlands: la Patria Chica and la Patria Grande--and who therefore may prove subversive of the bigoted sort of nationalism that has recently become so prevalent in the industrialized nations of the West. It is the memory of a people who remember that among the worst oppressors of our Native and African ancestors are some of our European ancestors--and both are equally our ancestors, and therefore, a memory that may well subvert many of our preconceived notions of oppression and how it works.

For all these reasons, we believe that ours is a memory that has something of value to contribute to the catholic memory of the church. That our reading of Scripture, out of our memory and our experience, may well illumine the sacred text in unexpected, yet significant ways. That the memory which we bring, and which we offer to share with the rest of the church, may well lead all of us to greater and more faithful obedience.

We are well aware that the truth and the memory that we bring to this society and to its theological circles are not always pleasant. They do not always fit the existing molds and threaten to shatter them. Sometimes we ourselves do not find them particularly pleasant.

Sometimes they subvert some of our most cherished notions and overthrow some of our most valued idols. But share them we must, because it is through them that we read and experience the Gospel. And sometimes, precisely because they subvert the memories and the idols of our oppression, we find them freeing.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” Jesus said to some of his Jewish disciples. But the truth was too painful; the truth was too risky. They rejected it: “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.”

Subversive memories are always painful. But they can also be freeing. Will you allow us--will you allow all others whose memories it would be easier to forget--to enrich and perhaps even to subvert your memory? Who knows? Perhaps in so doing we shall all attain greater truth, and thereby greater freedom. For you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

