I want to make a deal with you. I will speak slowly even if it kills me, and you promise not to do what I used to do when hearing about Liberation Theology. Turn off my ear and heart, saying to myself: “that theology has nothing to do with us, here in the rich USA. It is for the poor, far away in Latin America.” As we will see immediately, this Theology of Liberation is as relevant to our nation, and to each one of us, as it is relevant for any part of the globe where there is injustice, unfairness, or oppression of any kind. For, where is that place, where none of these is present?

This revolutionary Theology of Liberation was developed by Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Catholic priest and native of Perú. He used to live and work among the poor of Rimac, a Lima slum and was a Professor of Theology at the Catholic University in Lima. At present he holds the John Cardinal O’Hara Professorship of Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

When, in 1968, Gutiérrez delivered his lecture titled “A Theology of Liberation” to a national meeting of lay persons, religious, and priests, in Chimbote, Perú, he was planting the seed of his liberating ideas. He already had seen enough suffering and poverty among his compatriots. He had also witnessed the commitment of many men and women working for the liberation of the oppressed in Latin America, many of them Christians.

Gutierrez’s purposes in developing his theology were among others:

*To pay attention to the critical function of theology with respect to the presence and activity of humankind in history. The most important instance of this presence is the struggle in poor and oppressed countries to construct a just and fraternal society where persons can live with dignity and be the agents of their own destiny. To show that the problem that the theology of liberation poses, is simultaneously traditional and new. Because the traditional approaches have been exhausted, it is necessary to seek new ones.*

This led Gutiérrez to reconsider the “practice” of the church in today’s world. The situation in Latin America, the only continent among the exploited and oppressed peoples where Christians are in the majority was especially interesting to him.

In other words, Liberation Theology called to integrity, by examining how closely the praxis of the church was aligned with the word that called Christians to bring justice to the poor and the oppressed, following the teachings of liberation in the Old Testament and those of Jesus in the Gospels.
The resulting indictment of the church and the new methods suggested to get rid of poverty and oppression did not please either the oppressor governments and elites, or the Vatican. Thus, one of the main enemies encountered by Liberation Theology was the then-Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, who declared: *An analysis of the phenomenon of liberation theology reveals that it constitutes a fundamental threat to the Faith of the Church. At the same time it must be borne in mind that no error could persist unless it contained a grain of truth.*

Any theology or philosophy that commits to the liberation of the oppressed and the poor has to necessarily strive to change the political, economical and social climates where oppression and totalitarianism exist. These changes, when they happen, invariably come after clashes between the old established order and those promoting the changes. Contrasting, if not lamenting, the enormous changes produced by the application of Liberation Theology, Ratzinger continues: *the crucial concepts are people, community, experiences and history. Previously it was the Church, namely, the Catholic Church in her totality —a totality that spanned time and space and embraced laity (sensus fidei) and hierarchy (Magisterium)—that constituted the hermeneutical criterion; now is the “community.” The experience of the “community” determines the understanding and the interpretation of the Scripture.*

The central tenet and foundation of Liberation Theology is the “preferential option of the poor.” This sentence alone demands much understanding both in its meaning and application. Gutierrez said that this concept originated with the following statement by John XXIII a month before the opening of Vatican II: *In face of the underdeveloped countries, the church is, and wants to be, the church of all and especially the church of the poor.*

What are the methods used by liberation theology to help liberate the poor and the oppressed? And why have they been so successful? One of the methods was making the Bible accessible to the common people, especially to the peasants and the urban oppressed living under subhuman conditions. This in itself was an amazing revolution. When I was growing up in Colombia, the common belief was that if you read the Bible by yourself, you will become crazy. This was instigated by the church, which said that you needed the church’s doctors to explain it to you. Even if you were free to read the Bible, very few poor people were literate enough to read it, or had money to buy one. Therefore, by making the Bible accessible to the common people, and by encouraging them to understand their lives in the light of the stories in the Gospel and in the Old Testament with their examples of liberation, Liberation Theology brought the church, the real church to them. Now, the people’s main interest is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible. There is a big distinction between the written *Bible* and the *Bible of Life*. Life itself is the place where God speaks; therefore, interpreting their lives is acknowledging God’s presence in them. The Bible then becomes a mirror where their lives are reflected in the gospel, and the gospel is reflected in their lives.
Another foundation of Liberation Theology is the “base communities” created to study and become familiar with the practical teachings of the Bible; to be at home with it. It has been estimated that in the early nineties there were some 80,000 base communities in Brazil alone. People come to these communities “to read the gospel in the context of life” to draw hope, courage, and power from that experience. As one peasant declared: *We are coming to understand that the church is us; we better understand the meaning of church when we attempt to improve our condition and the conditions of all the people of our community.*

Liberation Theology along with the changes contained in Vatican II, has freed the poor and illiterate to participate more fully in the Mass. This foundational ritual, formerly said in Latin and with the priest turning his back to the congregation was alienating and exclusivist. Now, the people attending mass in the base communities are invited to participate by dialoguing and commenting on their reflections on the gospel, or by replacing a reading by an account of a significant incident in the community, and, at other times, by replacing the reading of the gospel by a dramatic representation of it. Today, thanks to Jonathan, our music director, and to our great choir, we had the privilege to hear parts of the famous Misa Criolla, composed by Ariel Ramirez in Spanish, with folkloric music from Argentina.

Liberation Theology, born in Latin America, has spread around the world. Gutiérrez explains: *Black, Hispanic, and Amerindian theologies in the United States, theologies arising in the complex contexts of Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, and the specially fruitful thinking of those who have adopted the feminist perspective—all of these have meant that for the first time in many centuries theology is being done outside the customary European and North American centers. The result in the so-called First World has been a new kind of dialogue between traditional thinking and new thinking. In addition, outside the Christian sphere efforts are underway to develop liberation theologies from Jewish and Muslim perspectives.* Even the Rev. Fred Muir, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Annapolis, adapted a Liberation theology for UUs. It is all contained in his book *A Reason for Hope.*

Liberation Theology proclaims that *The ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed is not to be found in the social analysis we use, or in human compassion, or in any direct experience we ourselves may have of poverty. These are doubtless valid motives that play an important part in our commitment. As Christians however, our commitment is grounded, in the final analysis, in the God of our faith.*

Reading this passage I wondered who or what is that we claim as the God of our faith? What is that center that compels us to do good, to resist the oppressors in solidarity with the oppressed and the destitute? We UUs are proud of our commitment to social justice, and I am the first to recognize the amazing victories that we as denomination have reached
through our collective and persistent work in specific issues. The Christians share the most valuable tools they have to help people be free in mind and soul. So do most of the important religions. They proudly proclaim the beauty and salvific effects of their beliefs. What do we UUs share? Most importantly for the task of liberation of those oppressed by divisive and oppressive creeds, how do we share our liberating faith? Where are our missions? How can we stretch our imagination and get on with the task of helping liberate others, when we are still wrestling nervously trying to compose our so-called elevator speeches?

The Theology of Liberation aims at the abolition of injustice of any form of exploitation, and to build a new society. However as Gutierrez’s recognizes, we will have an authentic theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves can freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society and in the heart of the People of God, when they themselves “account for the hope”, which they bear, when they are the protagonists of their own liberation. We can easily see how this goes very well with our Unitarian Universalist approach to individual theology and to self-reliance. However, for the poor and oppressed to be free in totalitarian societies is very difficult, if not impossible. The mass media, particularly TV, inundate our minds these days with images demonstrating this truth. Our faith, our religious beliefs, are precious and urgently needed in a world that is torn apart by theological waves of self-righteousness, of divisions between chosen and infidels. Our ethics and theology of a world at peace, with justice and freedom for all, is calling us to lay down our comfortable cocoons of pride, and of work for social justice by proxy.

Let us all here be eager participants in the liberation of the oppressed whatever form that oppression may take. Here at First Parish, we have many opportunities to be of service within and without our congregation. Just reading the announcements each Sunday, or the Newsletter, we find enthusiastic and dedicated leaders offering us opportunities to free ourselves and to help free others. Let us, like Severino, in the prayer/story we just heard be so strong in our faith that nobody can defeat us in our struggle for justice. May we be full of holy happiness, even as our lives may be full of suffering; may we radiate peace and love even in the middle of the struggle. May our religious home, this building we call our church in Harvard Square, be the home of the pilgrim and the sojourner. May this beloved spiritual congregation be the home of the ones who come asking for a quiet place to cry, to pray, to regain courage as they continue their human journeys. May we be the holy ground for the countless spiritual seekers, pilgrims of the soul, searching for the home of God.

Amen and blessed be.