

Most hymns are known, even named by the first line. I chose this hymn by Miriam Winter because the first line stands out in my memory as so important: “O for a world where everyone respects each other’s ways!” In the Christian faith we use the word justice a lot, not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of fairness, working at getting a level playing field for all. It follows the ideals of our country’s founding documents: “liberty and justice for all”... and “truths that are self-evident, that all are created equal.” Another memorable verse of Miriam Winter’s song says: “The poor are rich, the weak are strong!” Yes, this verse is an echo of 1Corinthians Chapter 1, where Paul says he boasts of his weaknesses, insisting that God transforms weakness into strength, that “the *weakness* of God is mightier than the strength of mortals.” He says, “We preach Christ crucified.”

We do learn by opposites. So what is the opposite of Paul’s words? The opposite is that “Might makes right.” (We have the strongest military, the most lethal weapons, so we will use force to impose our way on others.) Sadly, the USA has acted like this for centuries now, especially with regard to Latin America, and, as a Spanish teacher, with love for many Latin Americans and their culture, I am quite upset by the killing and ongoing threats to our southern neighbors.

When I was a pre-med sophomore at college, another pre-med told me about a paramedical mission group called Amigos de las Americas (Friends of the Americas). It would be great for my resume, but it also was a good service mission; we gave vaccinations against measles at the time, and my team went to the rain forest of Ecuador in the summer of 1977... what an eye opener! Such poverty, kids running along the muddy banks of the river with no shoes. Houses had straw roofs, and the food was mostly rice and bananas, with occasional meat of a wild boar or a monkey. We had a medical doctor from Germany as part of our team, and while our main mission was to vaccinate against measles, what I remember most was how this doctor kept telling us that we should read a book by Eduardo Galeano called “Open Veins of Latin America!” (Subtitle: “Five centuries of the pillage of a continent”). Of course, the book was banned in many Latin American Countries. Military dictatorships essentially praised the book by banning it! Why? It was telling *the truth* about the history of Latin America, about oppressive rule by the military and the wealthy. (As a Holocaust

survivor said recently, we re-tell our painful history “so that we don’t let it happen again!”) Why are we now allowing the banning of books in libraries and in institutions of higher learning? Universities, are founded on the principle of free exchange of ideas and perspectives. Freedom of speech should be welcome on campuses.

Back then, I was so immersed in my science books, that I never did find or read the Open Veins of Latin America. But now, because of our current attacks on Venezuela, I found an old copy of the book from inter-library loan. The book may be 50 years old, but it seems that much is the same in our relationship with Latin America. Listen to some excerpts:

*Latin America is the region of “open veins.” Everything, from its discovery until our times, has been transmitted into European -or United States- capital. Everything: the soil, its fruits and its mineral rich depths. Our defeat was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others. The well-being of our dominating classes is the curse of our multitudes, condemned to exist as beasts of burden.*

*Around 1550, silver mines were discovered in Potosi’ Bolivia and in Zacatecas Mexico; thus began the exploitation of silver. The “silver rush” quickly eclipsed gold mining. Latin America was a huge mine; it was a European business. Latin America's precious minerals made fortunes for Spanish and European nobles who took advantage of primitive American peoples. The rape of accumulated treasure was followed by the systematic exploitation of the forced labor of Indians and abducted Africans in the mines. The Latin American colonial economy functioned at the service of capitalism developing elsewhere. (There is a “violent character” inherent in such a system... An international market demands cheap products, thus there must be cheap, even forced labor.)*

*There is little or no silver left in many of the mines of Potosi’ Bolivia. They say the Spaniards even swept out the seams with brooms. In three centuries, the Potosi’ mines consumed 8 million lives. The natives were torn from their agricultural communities and driven to the hills of the mines. Freezing outdoor temperatures alternated with the infernal heat inside the hills. The natives hacked out the metal with pics and then carried it up on their shoulders by the light of a candle. Of every ten who went up into the freezing wilderness, seven never returned.*

*The mines required a great displacement of people and dislocated agricultural communities; they not only took countless lives through forced labor, but also indirectly destroyed the farming system. The “Indians” were taken to the mines, and were made to leave their lands. The native peoples were pushed into the poorest areas of mountains or deserts as the dominant civilization extended its frontiers. The natives have suffered, and continue to suffer, the curse of their own wealth; that is the drama of all Latin America.*

*The sugar plantations of the Caribbean islands were the places where slave or indigenous labor produced “white gold.” Decay eventually sets in with exhaustion of the soil. It is also the story of coffee, and of the fruit plantations. The more a product is desired by the world market, the greater the misery it brings to the Latin American peoples, whose sacrifice creates it. Have we even heard of “Fair Trade Coffee?” (Where the small farmers are actually given a livable wage?)*

*Galeano reflects wisely on the prevalence of military dictatorships: The gap that exists in Latin America between the well-being of the few, and the misery of the many is infinitely greater than in Europe or the United States. Hence the methods necessary to maintain this gap are much more ruthless.*

*Eduardo Galeano died in 2015, but said as recently as 2009: Not only the United States, but also some European countries have spread military dictatorships all over the world. And they feel as if they are able to teach democracy? The military dictators hardly take their thrones before they invite foreign concerns to exploit the cheap, abundant workforce. Slave ships no longer cross the ocean. But today the slave masters operate from the ministries of labor. It is Economic slavery: African wages, with sales at European prices.*

*Regarding Venezuela in particular, Galeano repeats that wealth has been drained from the country by the international oil companies. The profits are quickly exported to the middlemen and to the ultimate sellers, while the producers get poverty wages. I’ll conclude with images of Lake Maracaibo, a huge lake in Venezuela.*

*Lake Maracaibo is covered with oil wells. It is a deafening center of oil culture. Caracas is a glittering city, yet in the surrounding hillside, there are hovels made of garbage. And according to a census, half of Venezuela’s children, do not go to school. The lake is a forest of towers. Within these iron structures,*

*the endlessly bobbing pumps have for half a century pumped up all the opulence and all the poverty of Venezuela. There are pumps even in houses and on street corners of surrounding towns, the lakeside towns where clothing, food and walls are stained black with oil. One Lakeside town, one of the biggest oil sources, brought prosperity to Caracas and to oil companies, but did not even have privies, and had only two paved streets.*

*A friend of Galeano made a trip to the towns around Lake Maracaibo, and said "The smell of death and decay overpowers the smell of oil." The little towns are semi-deserted, with streets deep in mud, and the stores falling down.*

We don't want this history to repeat itself: It's a history of the pillage of rich minerals and petroleum resources. The relationship between North and South America is an example of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, with oppression, military and economic, entrenched in the system. Galeano asks, *"Is Latin America a region condemned to humiliation and poverty? Condemned by whom? Is God or nature to blame? The oppressive climate? Is racial inferiority to blame? Or maybe its plight is a product of history... made by human beings and thus able to be unmade by human beings!"*

As I reflect on this book, I suggest that we can change our caste-like, subjugating relationship with our neighbors to the south... by first of all calling for a Stop to all military oppression, a Stop to economic exploitation, and a Stop to the bloodletting, the Open Veins of Latin America. Then, in its place, we must lift up moral and religious ideals... Regarding trade, How do we treat them as we would want to be treated? How do we love our neighbors as ourselves? And a simple, useful question for moral guidance can always be "What would Jesus do?"... remembering Jesus' warnings about ever-increasing wealth and rule by violence: "You cannot serve both God and Money; one will be the master." And... "If you live by the sword you will die by the sword." There is no room for economic exploitation or military domination in the Way of our Divine Master. Amen.