



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 18, 2018

JEREMIAH 31:31-34; PSALM 51:1a, 2-13; HEBREWS 5:5-10; JOHN 12:20-33

GRAIN OF GLORY

John 12:20-33 *[Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.*

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.]

Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated 38 years ago this coming Saturday; he was 62 years old. For most of his adult life, he was a conservative, status-quo priest who was not overly concerned with the plight of the rural poor in El Salvador. But first-hand experience serving a countryside

community, where he witnessed rising violence and government repression, opened his eyes and everything changed.

In the last three years of his life, he became the unwavering "voice of the voiceless." He denounced the killings, torture and disappearances of community leaders; he

demanded justice for the atrocities committed by the army and police and he set up aid programs to support victims of violence. As a result, he was vilified in the press, denounced by fellow bishops and Christians of the wealthy classes, and harassed by government security forces.ⁱ

But he was steady, speaking week after week on the radio to both the oppressed and the oppressors, proclaiming God's mandate for love, justice, and mercy and the promise of forgiveness for all. And today's gospel reading was a favorite of his. He wrote and reflected frequently on the image of the single grain of wheat that, because it dies, bears much fruit. Moments before he was assassinated, he gave a homily on it. You could say that he embodied this gospel reading.

This passage marks the turning point in John's gospel from Jesus' ministry to his journey to the cross. He has traveled throughout Judea and Samaria, gathering and teaching his disciples, healing the sick, and restoring others to life, all the while challenging the hypocrisy and corruption of the religious leaders. When Jesus

arrives in Jerusalem for the festival of Passover, the crowds gather around him, hailing him as the "King of Israel." The Pharisees grow alarmed and say to each other, "We've lost control. The whole world is following him!"

And right on cue, some Greeks arrive, seeking Jesus. That means his influence is spreading beyond the Jewish community, and the Pharisees see clearly that this man has lit a fire that is spreading fast. His vision of a God who desires abundant life for everyone and his embrace of outcasts and notorious sinners are giving new energy and boldness to a formerly fearful and compliant populace. So, the Pharisees plot to kill him.

Jesus recognizes the turning point, too, and says to his disciples, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I'm telling you, a grain of wheat remains just a single grain unless it falls in the earth and dies. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Jesus is talking about the purpose of his own life and death and

what that means for his followers, including us. To understand, we need to look at the symbolic language.

First, what does it mean to be glorified? Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the “glory of God,” also called the “Shekinah,” refers to the dwelling or presence of God. The Israelites experienced it as a pillar of cloud and fire that traveled with God’s people and rested on Mt. Sinai. Moses was transfigured by its brightness. So to glorify God is to manifest all that God is – to make God present in a real, tangible way.

Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus is identified as the glory of God – the presence of God in a physical, relational form. In the first chapter, describing the incarnation, John says, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.” In his life, Jesus glorifies God by showing forth God’s desires for justice and mercy. And he does not abandon these values as the threat of death becomes real. So when Jesus tells his disciples, “The hour has come for me to be glorified,” we can hear, “Now is the time that God is

manifest. Watch me, follow me, and you will encounter the Holy One yourself.”

And then he offers them the example of the grain of wheat. Only if it is buried in the earth can it be completely changed from a solitary grain to a flourishing plant that provides daily bread for those who need it. There is a sense of surrender implied, a leap of faith in giving up a fixed and limited way of being to be transformed for a more abundant and life-giving existence.

This invitation to transformation is at the heart of Jesus’ saying, “Those who love their life lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” The “world” named here (*kosmos*) is not God’s creation, the beauty that surrounds us, but the human-made structures and institutions that perpetuate domination, violence and inequity in the name of order and safety. A better word than “world” would be “the System.”

The same System that operated in El Salvador in Oscar Romero’s time and operates to some degree in every modern society, including our own. The System that is based on hierarchy and control, privileging the powerful and silencing

others. The System that enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right.ⁱⁱ You know the ideas: My family, our nation, can only flourish if we are more powerful than

others. We need more weapons to be truly safe. We must arm teachers to protect school children.

ⁱ From Romero Trust website (romerotrust.org.uk).

ⁱⁱ Walter Wink, "The Myth of Redemptive Violence," *The Bible in Transmission*, Spring 1999.



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