

John 2:1-11

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

SERMON

Every year when we come to Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, I'm reminded how good it is to know and appreciate the modern saints of our faith and tradition. Being challenged, together, by King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* remains one of my favorite Sundays we've celebrated in worship. When coupled with the fact that I sometimes bore myself with hearing only my own reflections on scripture, it seems good that we would take a Sunday at least once a year to learn about the life and hear some of the good words of those who have shaped the modern church. Of course, we could stick with Dr. King and never run out of good material to be challenged with, but you all can do that on your own! Instead, let's meet another friend and colleague of the faith, another man who worked tirelessly for the rights of the most forgotten and mistreated of his countrymen. This year, it is my joy to remind all of us, and introduce some of us, to the wisdom and life of Archbishop Óscar Romero, who was canonized as a saint in the Roman Catholic tradition in October of last year.

Óscar Romero was born in El Salvador in 1917 to a carpenter and his wife, one of 5 children. Óscar was a talented young carpenter's apprentice, but his love of learning was greater. So, after completing the three years of education provided in his rural town, Óscar received permission to enter seminary, to study to become a priest at the young age of 13. He studied hard, finishing his education in Rome, and actually had to wait a full year after graduating before getting ordained, as he was a year too young at 24! He was ordained in Italy and stayed on for a few years to complete his PhD in theology. In 1942 he returned to El Salvador, with a brief stop off along the way thanks to some Cuban police, and from 1942 to 1967 he served as the parish priest for the cathedral in San Miguel, El Salvador.

It was a unique time in the history of the Catholic Church to be a priest. The Second Vatican Council, which radically reformed and modernized the worship and the theology of the church came down in 1961, and in 1968 the bishops of South America met to decide what this might mean in their own context. South and Central America, as many of you know, were wracked with social and income inequality, as well as political corruption, during this period, and the bishops, rather radically, decided that if the church is the instrument of God's work in the world, then they must be active on behalf of those who experience oppression of any kind—especially political or economic inequality in their own countries. They preached what they called “God’s preferential option for the poor” and proclaimed that peace is not found, but built, and that Christians would be the architects of such a profound and radical peace.

But this wasn’t Óscar Romero’s cup of tea, at least publicly, at the time. He, much as you might expect any person with a PhD in theology...he was a bit of a bookworm. When he moved to San Salvador in 1970 to become the Bishop, he was circumspect about his opinions, and kept his disagreements with the government and ruling class of El Salvador limited to private letters, not for public comment. Because of this circumspect, middle of the road, bookish public persona, Romero made for a palatable choice for Archbishop when the seat opened up in 1977. The vote was, as you might expect, more than a little “influenced” by the president and other wealthy oligarchs who pulled the strings behind all El Salvador’s major leadership roles.

And that’s certainly how he started out. Milquetoast at best. Óscar Romero was aware of the unrest across the country, but he tried to keep himself out of it, preaching a gospel that felt true, but neutral. He kept distance from the Catholic priests who were busy organizing alongside the *campaneros*, the rural workers, the farmers, and the peasant class. One such priest was his personal friend, Father Grande. At the same time as his call to become Archbishop, an election for President was taking place. The election was rife with fraud, intimidation by the army, voter disenfranchisement, and open assault against the rural class. When over 60,000 people gathered to protest, including Father Rutilio Grande, the police broke up the crowd. Most fled, but the police fired into the crowd. The priests sheltered folks within the church on the square, but around 300 people died that day. Archbishop Romero was troubled, but tried to walk the line, keeping the ruling class happy while not totally abandoning the people.

Three weeks later, everything changed. Father Grande, a rabble rouser of a priest, a Marxist, a champion of the farmer and the forgotten peasant, and a close personal friend of Óscar Romero, he was gunned down and killed. The Archbishop raced to the cathedral where Father Grande’s body was taken, he spent the day sitting with the body, one by one listening to the stories of the local peasants Father Grande had served. He listened to their stories of family members mysteriously disappeared, they claimed by the military. He heard their stories of neighbors killed by guerillas, ostensibly those fighting the government. He listened to the work of his friend. And in this incident, something snapped. Romero could no longer maintain a façade of balance. When reflecting later on

this day, he said, "When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.'"

At the mass for Father Rutilio Grande, Archbishop Óscar Romero called the death an assassination, plotted because Father Grande spoke up on behalf of the peasants, demanding further, "We have asked the legal authorities to shed light on this criminal act, for they have in their hands the instruments of this nation's justice and they must clarify this situation. We are not accusing anyone nor are we making judgements before we have all the facts. We hope to hear the voice of an impartial justice since the cause of love cannot be separated from justice. There can be no true peace or love that is based on injustice or violence or intrigue." The statement was careful, but a clear accusation of those in power. And it was the beginning of a new Archbishop.

He closed the nation's catholic schools for three days and cancelled all masses the following Sunday, inviting the entire nation to come and celebrate the mass at the national cathedral, together. The crowd for mass that Sunday was substantially larger than the 60,000 who came to the protest even a few weeks before. Again, Romero demanded justice for Father Grande, and for the hundreds of others who had gone missing or had been killed.

Under his leadership, and against the advice of all but one of his Bishops, the Catholic church in El Salvador began the slow, painful, and necessary work of documenting every story of every farmer and peasant. The priests would listen, collect photos, read the newspapers, and write. Photos of leaders and their family members who spoke in opposition to the government and then mysteriously "disappeared" were collected. When bodies were found, brutally tortured and murdered and then dumped out with the trash, again the stories and photos were recorded, the bodies identified and correlated. Each week in his Sunday radio sermon, Romero would first recount the news of the week, telling the stories of those who had gone missing or who had been killed...both by the shadowy hand of the government and by the guerilla gangs fighting on behalf of the farmers and campaneros. He would then preach the gospel, challenging both the immoral leadership and the local gangs fighting back to renounce their violence and accept the forgiveness and reconciliation of Jesus, that the Kingdom of God might be present for all of El Salvador.

On November 26, 1978 he implored his listeners, at this point almost 40% of urban folks and over 75% of rural folks with the following, "When we despise the poor person or the harvester of coffee or sugar cane or cotton, it is the face of Christ we despise. Let us think of the campesinos who even today are traveling about in search of sustenance for the whole year. Let us not forget them, for they are the face of Christ. The face of Christ is there among the sacks and baskets of the harvesters. The face of Christ is there in the torture and cruelty of the prisons. The face of Christ is dying of hunger in the children who have nothing to eat. The face of Christ is the needy person who asks the church to speak out. How can the church refuse if it is Christ who is telling her, "Speak for me"? At the hour of that final judgement I don't want to be on the left side hearing the words, "Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire, for I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was in need and you did not care for me." You were more concerned about the purity of your orthodoxy; you were more concerned about quiet time for your prayer; you were more

concerned about your congregation or your school. You didn't want to contaminate yourself with derelicts. You were worried about your social and economic and political prestige, and that's why you despised those who were asking you for help—and there I was." This is the norm by which Christ will judge us. His kingdom is love, a love that builds us up."

The civil war in El Salvador was complicated, and no one looked good. The government was corrupt. They assassinated many priests, killed hundreds if not thousands of their own citizens, starved the people, tortured, jailed, maimed with abandon, and denied all of it. The guerilla fighters on the other side employed kidnapping, murder, and a campaign of terror against those in leadership and their families. It was bloody and messy and awful. And through it all, Romero spoke out more and more forcefully for the radical Kingdom of God, the role of the Christian in bringing it about, with the risk building all the time.

On March 23, 1980, he spoke directly to the army, pleading, "Brothers, you are a part of your own people. You are killing your own brother and sister campesinos, and against any order a man may give to kill, God's law must prevail: "you shall not kill!" No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to observe an immoral law. It is time for you to reclaim your conscience and obey your conscience rather than the command to sin...in the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people whose laments rise up each day more tumultuously toward heaven, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression!" His radio homily went on for over an hour.

On March 24, 1980, three years after becoming Archbishop, Romero was celebrating mass in the little chapel outside the cancer ward of the hospital that treated the terminally ill. A few nuns were present along with the family of his friend, the owner of an opposition newspaper. It was a small mass, given in requiem for the mother of his friend. After a short homily, Romero stepped up to the altar and began the eucharistic liturgy. A shot rang out, Archbishop Óscar Romero crumpled to the floor, and there, surrounded by the nuns and a few friends, he bled out and died.

On March 30 over 250,000 people showed up at his funeral to mourn the passing of this man of peace. Unfortunately, even there, as they celebrated the funeral mass, the people weren't safe. Smoke bombs went off, followed by rifles, some of which were posted on the roof of the national palace. Over 50 people died in a massacre, and while the guns were blazing, the archbishop was laid to rest in the crypt below the cathedral.

Archbishop Romero knew, the moment he began his outspoken work, that he wasn't long for this world. In fact, he knew the likelihood he would be assassinated was high. Just a few weeks before his assassination he wrote, "I express my consecration to the heart of Jesus...I place under his loving providence all my life, and I accept with faith in him my death, however hard it be...For me to be happy and confident, it is sufficient to know with assurance that in him is my life and my death, that in spite of my sins I have placed my trust in him and shall not be disappointed, and others will carry on with greater wisdom and holiness the works of the church and the nation."

Where we find ourselves today, in the United States in 2019, it's very different from the civil war of a Central American nation over 4 decades past. And yet, while the specifics are different, there's something of the core which remains true, right? Inequality is still amongst us. There are still those whose work isn't enough to put food on their tables and a roof over their head, and too often the reaction of those in power is to mock or blame, rather than seek a difficult justice. And so the words of the most righteous Saint Óscar Romero should stick with us. They should challenge us to a greater justice, to be people who work toward the coming Kingdom of God, counting the cost, and yet seeking justice all the same. And in doing so, in order to live according to that most difficult commandment—to love our enemies and bless those who persecute us, we should hold fast to a last word from the Archbishop, spoken just days before his death. About those who were, in all senses, his enemies, he said, "You can tell them, if they succeed in killing me, then I pardon them, and I bless those who may carry out the killing. But I wish they would realize that they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the church of God—the people—will never perish." Amen.¹

¹ All quotations taken from "The Scandal of Redemption" by Oscar Romero, translated by Joseph Owens, SJ.