

Lent III Year A

"The church is obliged by its evangelical mission to demand structural changes that favor the reign of God and a more just and brotherly (sisterly) way of life. Unjust social structures are the roots of all violence and disturbances. ... Those who benefit from obsolete structures react selfishly to any kind of change."

Those words were spoken in November of 1979 by Bishop Oscar Romero at the beginning of a violent civil war in El Salvador....Oscar Romero, for those of you who don't know, was a Catholic bishop in El Salvador who spoke out against the ruling military junta....a regime that ruled by fear and violence...the Catholic Church was largely complicit with the ruling body...probably in the interest of self preservation...but Romero chose the side of the persecuted...the side of right...the side of the vulnerable....the side of justice....He was criticized by the archbishop of El Salvador and the Vatican for being a trouble-maker...and he was criticized by the government for being a traitor....His words I just quoted stand as prophecy that has forever been true, and will forever be true....A man who found his second life....a life lived utterly for the good of the whole.

At a Wednesday mass on a major feast day in March at which there was an overflow of people at the Cathedral in San Salvado, the bishop sharply criticized the government for detaining and torturing several conscientious objectors, some of them women....The government said officially that the church had no business speaking of public affairs. The following Sunday while celebrating the mass, assassins entered the church and shot Oscar Romero to death...blood soaking the frontal of the Altar, and the desert stone of the reredos....The frontal was burned with his body...but the blood on the wall behind was lacquered and preserved for all to see to this day.

Last week we heard the story of Nicodemus....Jesus telling him that to become a disciple one must be born anew, born from above...and we talked about how that meant being initiated into the community of faith, into the larger life of sacrifice....that our first birth is our physically entering this earthly realm...but that our second birth is when we come of age...come of age enough to join the very communion of saints to bear witness to the truth and act upon it... to stand with the community for the greater good no matter what the cost....no matter what the cost...that is the second life that all of us must enter....and perhaps there's a better way to say that...perhaps a better way to say it is that we are called to recognize the second life already

germinating within us....and upon recognizing it, brothers and sisters, we dare not shrink from it...because once seeing the truth we can never go back...I imagine Bishop Romero had second thoughts about speaking out against the government...he knew it would likely cost him his life....but it cost him his first life not his second life....This past Thursday was the 31st anniversary of his death.

Today's Gospel text is yet another story of entering one's second life. The metaphor for John continues to be water which makes this a baptismal text...baptism the outward and visible sign of entering one's second life... Jesus and the Samaritan woman have this cryptic conversation about water ... In the Greek in this text there is a word for still water, like water in a pool or a well, and then there is a word translated living water which means water on the move, like a stream or a river....so there is a play on the word water in this passage....the operative point being that in our first life we are still, and in the second we are on the move, on the move to change the world, change the world as it comes to us, small or epic....The Samaritan woman gets it...and she leaves her water jar at the well and heads for the village, sent back into the community from which she had surely been exiled, proclaiming this second life....a life that she has discovered that embraces all people, sinners and the righteous alike...a life that she has discovered that embraces all places...Judean, Galilean, and Samaritan....a life that only embraces and includes.... she's heard from one who knows....and the magnetism of this second life is undeniable...the townspeople are converted as well....and they make the statement that this Jesus is the Savior of the world...Now let's stop here for a moment for an important clarification... Savior of the World is the proper title of the Emperor...as is the term Son of God...so when you hear those terms in the gospels, you know the writers have gone into some political meddling...The Samaritans call Jesus the Savior of the world, not the Emperor....in other words, the way of domination and violence and abasement and fear and greed...the way of power lorded over the weak....Imperial power... is not the way of salvation...the way to salvation is inclusion and embrace and dignity without regard to station or ethnicity or gender...In God's realm, this realm of the second life, all sit equally with honor at the table....and in this second life there is no place for violence and fear....I watch the unfoldings in Libya, now Syria, Yemen... the same old patriarchal doctrine, the same old paradigm of might making right... and I know it's complicated, but I wonder what the means of the second life might bring to these escalating situations... the means of Spirit.... The means of forbearance... the means of mercy... the means of compassion....of seasoned creativity....of

maturity...knowing all the while that unjust social structures, as Romero reminds us, are the roots of violence...but we have to remember, our means are our ends in the making....and violence will only beget violence, no matter how smart the bombs....Maybe I missed it in the news, but where is ardent diplomacy in all this!?...Abiding by the same old paradigm, the human cost in whatever happens will be great....the vulnerable suffering the most as they always do.

Brothers and sisters we are called to a higher love, because we are born from above....we are called to the second life...the life of spirit and truth...a life of maturity and creativity all girded by hope and compassion... This passage we read today is long, so much so that we left part of it out....a part that seemed a non sequiter....in it, after the Samaritan woman departs, the disciples come to Jesus and ask him if he wants something to eat...and Jesus tells them two important things, two important things that we should take to heart as well: He tells them that his food is to do the will of the One who sent him.... So what truly feeds us is living the second life...many of you know that to be true...and second, that by entering this second life we join the second life laborers who've come before us.... in short, the saints, and we take up their labor....Saints are the icons for us who show us how to live the second life...how to live as the baptized...the ones who have drunk of living water... water that moves... and moves us to go into our world and labor for our mission, which is to demand the structural changes that favor the reign of God...a just and brotherly/sisterly commonweal so that envy and violence will at last be defeated...Dare we believe it is possible....and we go, not wielding worldly power, but with the power of compassion and forbearance and imagination and balance....calling out what we perceive as wrong, but with non-violent creative solutions...otherwise the cost is always, always, always too great.

In the second life... In God's commonweal that is now and not just yet...there is only mercy, and justice and equality and dignity for all people of all places, and may it come on eagles' wings and right soon...Blessed Oscar Romero pray for us now and at the hour of our death....may your blood never be in vain.