

Sermon on Luke 13:1-9
Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019
Commemoration of Saint Oscar Romero of El Salvador
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, by James Erlandson

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace and peace....

It may be one of the misfortunes of our times that we find Jesus' lesson about Galileans by Pontius Pilate and those who died in a tragic construction accident so familiar and fitting. Jesus was told of this slaughter of Galilean civilians by Roman soldiers while he was teaching the thousands who gathered to hear him as he was one his way to Jerusalem. Rather than respond with shock, about the horror that Romans would do such a terrible thing, he asked them, "*Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?*" Well, no, but.... Jesus continued, "*Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*"

Well, we didn't expect that. But the questions come to us, as we consider all the tragedies we witness today in our world. 50 Muslims in prayer are massacred by a white terrorist shooter in their Christchurch, New Zealand mosque a week ago. An Ethiopian airlines plane goes down, killing 157. There have been floods devastating farms and homes in several midwestern states - Iowa, Missouri and Nebraska. A cyclone hitting Southern African nations of Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe has killed hundreds, swept entire villages away, and floodwaters have stranded many thousand survivors, whose lives are still at risk. A few days ago a chemical explosion in a factory in Jiangsu Province, in eastern China killed 47 workers inside and injured more than 90. On Friday two American servicemen were killed in Afghanistan. A hit and run driver killed a young woman on the East Side of St. Paul last week. So what if Jesus asked us, "*were they more sinners than you or I?*" By no means! It's a rhetorical question, of course. Though some may believe that misfortune is punishment for bad behavior or sins in our past, most Christians and people of other faiths do not believe that natural disasters, accidental deaths are punishment for sin. But we often do rationalize deep in our subconscious, thinking somehow that another person's misfortune may somehow be related to *their* bad choices – because we have to find a *reason*, when there usually isn't one to be found. How do we explain the unexplainable? That's when bad theology sometimes creeps into our thinking, that the victims are to blame for their suffering. Or, it's simply "fate".

Instead, Jesus points us to a different response, saying that it is wrong to think that those who experience misfortune or tragedy are somehow guilty of more

sin than others, like us. The natural disaster strikes people for no reason, except that they are in the “wrong place at the wrong time”. The terrible consequences of war and violence strike human beings, causing great harm because of evil in the world; through no fault of their own. Still, Jesus says, “*unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*” Repent literally means to “turn around, to walk in another direction,” being transformed by God to follow Jesus with faith and a new purpose. Misfortune and tragedy may still occur, even then, but repentance is critical to our lives and our faith. But it doesn’t have to be immediate and instantaneous. As Jesus said in the parable of the fig tree, instead of cutting down the tree which did not bear fruit, the gardener said, “*Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit NEXT year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.*” Jesus calls you and me to repent, but will give us time to change direction – to listen to our neighbor, to be fertilized by their stories and by the truth of God. It may not be pleasant – like manure to us – but Jesus knows it takes time for us (and the Church) to change course, like an ocean liner turning around. It can’t be done “on a dime”! But repentance is crucial.

Today we commemorate the newest saint in the Roman Catholic Church, Oscar Romero, Bishop of El Salvador and a martyr of the faith. Romero was appointed archbishop in 1977 when he was but a pious, conservative bishop – appointed by his superiors because he was not “political” at all, wouldn’t make waves, and like most church leaders, would never challenge the status quo. No one would foresee that one day he would be denounced by his fellow bishops, earn the hatred of the rich and powerful of El Salvador and the military, and be targeted for assassination. He was the first bishop slain at the altar since Thomas Becket in the twelfth century in England. No one would have predicted his transformation.

But something changed in Archbishop Romero after his appointment. He officiated at the funeral of his friend, Father Grande, a priest who had been assassinated for his commitment to social justice. He was deeply shaken by this, and by the increasing injustice and violence overtaking his country. As he listened to the sufferings of the poor, saw their poverty, their oppression by the wealthy, and the violence of the military, he underwent a conversion. It was like he “repented and was transformed” from a meek parish priest into a fearless champion of justice. His weekly sermons were broadcast by radio throughout the country, shining the light of the gospel on the terrible injustices that were happening in the countryside. To some he became the “conscience of the nation”, but to others he talked like a “subversive”, a “communist”. But it was a transformation of faith.

So what did Romero say about this passage from Luke? After three years service as archbishop, Romero said in a sermon, “*Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none!*” From 1977-1980 his preaching on charity and social justice had fallen largely on deaf ears. Politically motivated

violence and human rights abuses in El Salvador were rising to critical levels. So the archbishop sounded a final appeal to repentance and conversion.

“My sisters and brothers,” he pleaded, “if this admonition of Jesus were ever valid, then it is certainly now, at this time in El Salvador, when life is endangered everywhere: Repent! Let us not be surprised by death! Let us walk with Christ and if death overtakes us as we walk with him then there is nothing to fear: death is a victory for those who believe in the Lord...Repentance is the synthesis of the whole gospel, and the foundation of the Kingdom of God.”

Romero didn't single out only one side for repentance: it applied to everyone – not only the wealthy ruling class, or the military who abused their power. He also addressed the social reformers, *“many people who have no faith are trying to make our country a place of greater justice, and so I say to them; my brothers who are atheists, my dear brothers who do not believe in Christ, or in the Church, your struggle is noble but not complete. Allow yourselves to be led by the plan of God, by the plan of true liberation...The God of Moses and Jesus is a God who lives, who feels, who acts and creates and guides history...who accompanies us as he accompanied Israel... He asked, “What does it mean to repent here and now in El Salvador? The true People of God are those who walk united with Christ, seeking the heavenly Jerusalem, working to better this earth but not working according to their own plans but according to the plan of the transcendent God.”*

He concludes by saying, *“We interpret this parable from the perspective of God's mercy. Luke points out the gentleness and patience of God who waits; perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in a year...This is an echo of the Lenten call to examine our lives and to see if we are producing fruit or if we are simply trees occupying space in the world...To repent is a sorrowful journey in the midst of tears and mourning, following Jesus on his Lenten path to Jerusalem, but this journey ends in a victory: the resurrection of the Lord is the resurrection of us all.”*

So what does it mean to repent here and now in the United States of America, today? What does it mean for you and me to repent? It means to turn our eyes and ears to Jesus, to follow him in his direction to Jerusalem, leading us all to life. It is, in Romero's words, *“never to preach violence, except the violence of love, which left Christ nailed to a cross...the violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood and sisterhood, the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work...When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows that it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things.”*

In Romero's last sermon, with his final words, he made an appeal to the men of the army: *"Brothers, you come from our own people. You are killing your own brother peasant when any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God which says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law...The church, the defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such an abomination...In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression.*

One day later, Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass in a small chapel in a cancer hospital where he lived. His funeral mass in the San Salvador Cathedral was attended by thousands, many who stood outside in the city plaza. Then the world heard him.

Lest you be discouraged by the consequences of sin and death, the following prayer was written by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, for a homily by Cardinal John Dearden in November, 1979, for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Romero, Bishop Untener included it in a reflection title "The mystery of the Romero Prayer". The mystery is that the words of this prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him. I repeat these words as we commemorate him today. It is known as *A Future Not Our Own.*

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives include everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Strengthen the people who have lost so much in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi because of the deadly cyclone which caused so much destruction in southern Africa. Send rescuers to those who have been stranded and isolated, comfort the many who have lost family, homes, livestock and whole towns and villages. Bless our sisters and brothers of Praise Covenant Church as we work with them to raise funds through our churches to help with relief. Hear us, O God,