

“DEATH COMES TO THE ARCHBISHOP”

**a worship service led by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
April 5, 2007 (Maundy Thursday)**

CALL TO COMMUNION

Good evening. We gather this evening to commemorate the Last Supper. The gospel writers give us a story of Jesus' last meal with the disciples that is laden with spiritual symbolism.

In a world in which subsistence itself was always in question for most people, taking nourishment together was a reflection of the physical reality of community. None of those gathered for the meal could know whether he would be going hungry very soon. Jesus invites the disciples to receive the bread and wine as the flesh and blood of his body. If these words were taken literally, they would have a ghoulish meaning. As symbols of communion, their significance is profoundly spiritual. Jesus is indeed talking about his own personal body, which he knows will be destroyed imminently. He is also invoking, however, the body of the spiritual community he led, the kind of body to which we ourselves refer when we sing hymns like “Gathered here in one strong body.” The lifeblood of that body, and of every person who is part of it, is the sense of belonging, of wholeness, of intimacy with others, that comes from communion -- from expressions of our love for and commitment to each other in a spiritual community. This communion is symbolized by bread and wine. May it nourish our spirit as well as our bodies.

Before we break bread together, we need to pause on who we mean when we say we. Let no one be left a stranger among us this evening. For this time, let the person or persons most important to you be the one or ones you do not know. We will take a few minutes to greet each other, with the intention that there then will be no one here who does not know everyone else here, no one here not known to everyone else here. And in that same spirit, please try to find someone you do not yet know to be with for this meal. The gong will ring to end this time of greeting and the beginning of the communion meal.

CALL TO WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Please join me in the spirit of prayer. . . . Holy Spirit, we gather as one strong body and open ourselves, that in our sight and in our listening, your constant nearness may be made real to us. Bless this sacred intention and the celebration of love, spirit, and community with which we humbly give it expression.

HOMILY

Twenty-seven years ago, on March 24 at 6:25 in the evening, an assassin hired by the government walked into the chapel at the Hospital de la Divina Providencia in San Salvador, the

capital city of El Salvador. He aimed a high-powered rifle at the Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, who was celebrating mass, and shot him to death. 250,000 people attended his funeral. 39 of them were killed when a bomb exploded and gunfire erupted.

The killing of Archbishop Romero followed a grisly pattern of violence against Catholic priests in San Salvador, in retaliation for their advocacy of land reform and other causes aimed at uplifting the landless, penniless peasants of that country. National Guardsmen shot priests and then drove tanks over their bodies. They tortured priests by attaching electrical wires to their genitals. Tens of thousands of peasants were tortured, murdered, or simply disappeared without a trace. The death squads who carried out these atrocities were supported by guns and money from the United States government. Many were trained at the School for the Americas in Georgia, a notorious “university of death” operated by the U.S. government for the benefit of its client states in the Third World.

Archbishop Romero championed the cause of the peasants. He spoke out against violence and condemned the government as a military dictatorship. He called on the United States to suspend its support for the government. He held an extraordinary mass to mourn the deaths of slaughtered priests and peasants, and 100,000 people came. Less than a year before his own death, he brought seven thick dossiers of evidence of these atrocities to the Pope at Rome.

The right-wing political party in El Salvador was distributing leaflets that read “Be a patriot -- kill a priest.” Two weeks before Romero’s death, an attache case was discovered behind the pulpit in his chapel. When the police opened it, they found a bomb that failed to go off. Romero knew that his advocacy was virtually certain to get him killed -- the deaths of other outspoken clerics were an unmistakable message from the government. He ignored this jeopardy and became ever more outspoken.

The day before his death, he made a direct appeal to members of the armed forces: “Brothers,” he said, “you came from our own people. You are are killing your own brothers. 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. It is high time you obeyed your consciences rather than sinful orders. The church cannot remain silent before such an abomination. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: stop the repression.”

In the martyrdom of Oscar Romero we see in modern terms the meaning of the Last Supper and the ritual of communion conveyed in the scripture. Jesus willingly sacrificed his own body and his own blood for the sake of this more profound body, with which his own body and blood were mixed, without which his own body and blood would have been meaningless. For him, an individual human body cut off from this lifeblood of this larger spiritual body was as good as dead.

Jesus' identification with that spiritual community was so thorough as to efface ego almost completely. So long as THAT body lived, he lived; and if it died, it would not matter whether his own body continued to live. At the Last Supper, Jesus knew he was going to be

executed. He knew well before this time that if he continued to do what he was doing, he would be killed. And he kept on doing it anyway. His communion with the disciples at the Last Supper, his calling upon the symbols of the bread and the wine, expressed his attitude toward the spiritual community and his prayer that the disciples would have the same experience and would act the same way.

We call this Thursday “Maundy” because of the mandate of Jesus’ ministry – a mandate of a love supreme. To be compelled by love is an experience free of coercion, sweet and liberating. It was his wish for everyone. A wish felt with conviction so deep that we must strain to imagine it, and we are here tonight to re-imagine it, make it vivid again.

At the Last Supper, Jesus wanted the disciples to see that death cannot conquer love, which is more powerful than emperors and their empires. The most dramatic evidence of that truth came from the Roman Empire itself, which found this barefoot son of a carpenter from Nazareth too dangerous – too threatening to a regime that depended on its own death-dealing capabilities for its survival. And likewise with the military generals in El Salvador, to whom a bespectacled cleric with no guns, no money, and no power in any conventional sense, was utterly terrifying.

When we see martyrdom, we think of sacrifice. But that’s a slippery word. Its conventional modern meaning is to confront a choice between two irreconcilable goods and to give up one for the sake of having the other. It conveys a sense of regret, of being deprived. Of coercion rather than true choice.

This word sacrifice comes to us from Latin words that mean, literally, to make sacred. We call things sacred that draw us closer to God. For Jesus, the larger body of the spiritual community had this quality of sacredness, for it was in the mutual love of that community that God would be found. Jesus made his life sacred by devoting it, freely and lovingly, to this sacred larger body. This devotion was expressed in the form of a ministry too radical to be tolerated by the Roman rulers. In the face of this jeopardy, for Jesus to save his physical life by repudiating this ministry, as the Romans were very willing to have him do, would have been to commit spiritual suicide -- cutting himself off from the lifeblood of the larger spiritual body. This places his martyrdom in an entirely different light. Rather than reflecting irreconcilable alternatives, his life and the life of the spiritual community are on the same side of the ledger. His choices were to embrace both, whatever the consequence, or to embrace neither, which would have meant spiritual death and a meaningless prolongation of bodily existence.

And this is how Oscar Romero lived and died. A bookish cleric, he had no radical views until he became Archbishop. In fact, he was an apologist for the status quo, confining his energies to issues of alcoholism, drug addiction, and pornography, cast in terms of personal morality. He was politically cautious and cool or even hostile to clerical initiatives for social justice. I tell his story tonight because unlike Jesus, whose image has been burnished to a blinding and unhelpful brightness by official church beatifications, Romero is disturbingly, frighteningly, inspiringly like you and me. A hero in the classical sense – an ordinary man who had an extraordinary awakening and did extraordinary things.

Romero's eyes were opened only when priests in El Salvador involved in land reform and other political movements began to be severely persecuted -- tortured and assassinated. He defied the government and became an advocate for the poor. They became, for him, that larger spiritual body raised up by Jesus at the Last Supper. Like Jesus, he knew that if he kept doing what he was doing, he would be killed. And he did it anyway. He gave his life for this larger body, but the giving began day by day, when he awakened to the spiritual lifeblood that flowed in his communion with the poor.

Holy week is a time when Christians speak of miracles. In the life of Oscar Romero, the miracle was not only that he walked through the door of martyrdom with his eyes wide open, but even more profoundly that he embraced the body of Christ, the larger spiritual community of the poor, in the three years of his awakened ministry as Archbishop of San Salvador. When so many other clerics, driven by raw fear for their lives, embraced the human urge to rationalize by calling their colleagues communists and terrorists, the miracle in the life of Romero was the choice he made to embrace the truth instead, without counting the cost.

The fuel for true miracles is great love. The miracles waiting in that larger spiritual body we call the church are not magical healing powers or empty tombs or voices of angels, but rather, a clarity that comes unexpectedly. An acuity in our senses that suddenly enables our eyes to see and our ears to hear what has been all around us for so very long.

The violence brought into Oscar Romero's life gave him both an advantage and a disadvantage that most of us don't have in bringing ourselves to that devotedly loving embrace of the larger spiritual body. The death of those close to him, brothers in the priesthood, was a wake-up call. It also was a gaping, pitch-black hole filled with fear that threatened to turn him away from the truth, toward the rationalizations into which so many others fell in order to distance themselves from their slain colleagues.

The cards fate deals to most of us will not include the prospect of martyrdom. But we certainly will be presented, every single day, with the choice of giving our lives for something. The story of the Last Supper asks us to consider not so much what we are willing to die for as what we are willing to live for.

Our answer will determine whether we are really alive at all -- in the only sense that ultimately matters: spiritually, which is to say, communally rather than merely individually. In that spiritual sense, whose blood runs through my veins? Through whose veins does my blood run? Who is the flesh of my flesh? As Jesus asked so many times in so many ways, who is my neighbor? Where do I find the larger body of which I am an inseparable part?

And when I find it, what am I called to do to express my love for it? In the world in which I live today, are there governments engaging in torture? Is violence being inflicted upon the larger spiritual body? Is love being expressed or suppressed in the unsensational small joys and agonies of daily living. How will I sacralize my life?

I leave communion this evening with a renewed sense of the urgency of these questions. I came to be consoled over the martyrdoms of human existence, known and unknown, historic in the lives and deaths of saints and merely personal in the daily losses and wounds I and those around me cause and receive. And I came to be challenged, once again, by the extraordinary aspiration of that man who wished more deeply than I have. Waiting for me here, in this communion, is the truth that is both consolation and challenge: I am not alone. We are indeed gathered here in one strong body.

Amen.