

In the name of the Loving, Life-giving, and Liberating God, who is the blessed Trinity.

Today, I want to tell you a little about one of the people we remember as a saint and a martyr: Oscar Romero, the Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, who was killed while celebrating the Eucharist in 1980. He lived in a time of massive upheaval in his country—upheaval stoked by our own U.S. government because of exaggerated concerns about Communism. Romero did not set out to upset the status quo, but in his short time as Archbishop, he witnessed thousands of poor farm workers killed by military police, and he could not remain silent in the face of such suffering. He called loudly and frequently for an end to the violence, and his voice carried enough weight that it is believed he delayed the civil war that began soon after his death.

Oscar Romero knew what it meant to stand between the people and the military, to protect those who could not protect themselves, and to call on those in power to act in the people's interest. In his final sermon, he spoke directly to the military, saying, “Each of you is one of us. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear a man telling you to kill, remember God’s words: ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God... in the name of God, I command you to stop the repression.”

Romero knew that his sermons, which were broadcast across the country, put him on the wrong side of those in power. He received multiple death threats before his assassination during the Eucharist. But he persisted... for the sake of the poor, who were being killed day after day, working to put an end to their suffering.

Our Old Testament reading today is from Ruth. Year B is the only year we hear from the books of the Bible named for women—both Esther and Ruth—and we missed the first reading of Ruth because we celebrated All Saints Sunday last week. That reading is arguably better than this one, but I am intrigued by our reading from Ruth today, in part because I know the rest of the story that our lectionary has left out.

Ruth is a bucolic book. Although the opening is not promising—all the men in the family die off one by one—the rest of the book is filled with kind people living caring lives, and, as we saw in our reading today, everything works out in the end! It is a delight to read. What’s interesting about Ruth is that it centers on a case study of an obscure Israelite law meant to protect widows and orphans: the law of Levirate Marriage. This law states that if a husband dies without giving his wife a male heir, his brother must provide her with a male heir to inherit in the original brother’s name. If there are no brothers, as in Ruth, that responsibility falls to the nearest male relative.

The issue men have with this law is that it delays their own line of inheritance. If their first son inherits their brother’s share, they have to hope for a second son to inherit their own portion. This is a law in which God asks community members to set aside their own

needs for the good of the community—especially widows and female children who would otherwise be left with nothing. But in the Old Testament, this often doesn't work out the way it does in Ruth. Men are more likely to try to evade this law rather than uphold it.

Something similar happens in today's Gospel reading. The story of a widow dropping her last two pennies in the basket is usually highlighted as a model of sacrificial giving. We hear Jesus' words as praise and typically overlook the surrounding context of the story.

The widow's story is part of a larger teaching about the Temple. At the beginning of our reading today, we heard Jesus condemn the religious leaders for "devouring widows' houses," and just after this reading, Jesus proclaims that not one stone of the Temple will be left on another. The religious leaders are mismanaging what has been given by the people to God. In that context, the widow is indeed giving more than anyone else—but at what cost, and to what end?

The truth is that Jesus does ask us to give sacrificially. Oscar Romero recognized that, as did Boaz in the story of Ruth. They looked out for others when nothing was required of them. Boaz was not actually the next in line to fulfill the law of Levirate Marriage for Ruth, but he sought out the person who was and asked if he would marry Ruth. When the other man would not, Boaz took care of her and Naomi. Oscar Romero did not have to keep speaking up. When he received death threats, he could have stepped back, chosen his words more carefully, refrained from stepping on toes. But he knew the poor of his country would continue to be killed if he did nothing.

This is Jesus' point in our gospel lesson, as well as in our other stories today. Even when we are not required to act, Jesus asks us to pay attention and care for those who might otherwise fall through the cracks. The widow should not have reached the point of having only two pennies to her name, and Jesus' teaching targets those in the community who would demand that of her. Though Jesus asks us to give sacrificially, God does not seek to drain every last drop from those who can ill afford it. We do that, and it is our duty to provide for those in our community so they don't reach this point.

The truth is that the Christian life is, by definition, a life lived in community. Boaz and Oscar Romero could not stand by because they knew God embraces all people. They knew God wants all humanity to flourish. That is Love. And it is the same Love that God asks of us: to keep our eyes open, to look around and notice those who are falling through the cracks, and to be God's hands and feet to them in as many ways as possible. Each of us is only one person. There is only so much we can do, but the hope God gives is that we can do something. We can choose Love, day in and day out, to shelter those who need it most.