**SERMON: CPUC – MARCH 22, 2015: “A FAITH THAT MOVES MOUNTAINS”**

TODAY IS THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, THE SEASON OF THE CHURCH YEAR WHEN WE ACCOMPANY JESUS INTO THE WILDERNESS FOR THE LAST FORTY DAYS OF HIS LIFE – THE JOURNEY TO HIS CRUCIFIXION, DEATH AND RESURRECTION. TODAY'S SCRIPTURE LESSON TELLS THE STORY OF JESUS CURING A BOY 'POSSESSED BY A DEMON.”

THE BOY WAS SUFFERING FROM EPILEPSY, AND HIS FATHER BROUGHT HIM TO JESUS' DISCIPLES, FOR HE HAD HEARD THAT THESE WERE PEOPLE OF FAITH AND THE POWER TO HEAL. BUT THE DISCIPLES WERE NOT ABLE TO RELIEVE THE CHILD'S SUFFERING, SO THE ANGUISHED FATHER BROUGHT HIS SON TO JESUS, WHO “REBUKED THE DEMON; AND IT CAME OUT OF HIM, AND HE WAS CURED INSTANTLY.”

AN ANGRY JESUS THEN REBUKED HIS DISCIPLES FOR THEIR TEPID FAITH. THE DISCIPLES CAME TO JESUS PRIVATELY AND SAID, “WHY COULD WE NOT CAST OUT THE DEMON?” AND HE SAID TO THEM, “BECAUSE OF YOUR LITTLE FAITH. FOR TRULY I TELL YOU, IF YOU HAVE FAITH THE SIZE OF A MUSTARD SEED, YOU WILL SAY TO THIS MOUNTAIN, 'MOVE FROM HERE TO THERE, AND IT WILL MOVE; AND NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR YOU.'”

DURING THE 1990'S, I WORKED FOR THE AUGSBURG COLLEGE CENTER FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION; I WAS PRIVILEGED SEVERAL TIMES TO VISIT THE COUNTRY OF EL SALVADOR, A SMALL NATION IN THE HEART OF CENTRAL AMERICA NAMED BY ITS EUROPEAN CONQUERORS AND COLONIZERS FOR JESUS: “EL SALVADOR” -”THE SAVIOR.”

IT IS SAID THAT FOR GENERATIONS, 14 FAMILIES OWNED NEARLY ALL THE LAND AND CONTROLLED THE WEALTH AND POLITICAL POWER OF THE NATION. IN THE 1970'S, A GUERILLA MOVEMENT EMERGED, AND EL SALVADOR ERUPTED IN A HORIFIC CIVIL WAR THAT CLAIMED TENS OF THOUSANDS OF LIVES.

A CENTRAL FIGURE IN THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE WAS THE PERSON WHOM WE REMEMBER TODAY – THE ARCHBISHOP OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EL SALVADOR – OSCAR ARNULFO ROMERO. 'MONSIGNOR ROMERO,' AS HE WAS KNOWN TO THE PEOPLE. A HOLLIWOOD FILM, TITLED “ROMERO,” WAS MADE ABOUT HIS LIFE AND DEATH. A FILM THAT REMINDS ME A LOT OF THE CURRENT FILM “SELMA.” IN FACT, ROMERO IS REFERRED TO BY MANY AS THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. OF LATIN AMERICA.

AFTER BEING NAMED ARCHBISHOP IN 1977, ROMERO GREW IN FAITH AND COURAGE AND BECAME AN OUTSPOKEN DEFENDER OF THE POOR AND MARGINALIZED OF EL SALVADOR. HE STOOD UP TO THE GENERALS AND THE OLIGARCHS, WHOM HE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR MOST OF THE VIOLENCE AND SUFFERING OF THE PEOPLE.

ON MARCH 24, 1980, MONSIGNOR ROMERO WAS MURDERED BY AN ASSASSIN'S BULLET WHILE SERVING COMMUNION IN A SMALL HOSPITAL CHAPEL . A 1993 UNITED NATIONS TRUTH COMMISSION REPORT STATES THAT ROMERO'S ASSASSINATION HAD BEEN ORDERED BY ROBERTO D'ABUSSON, AN OFFICER IN THE SALVADORAN MILITARY AND A GRADUATE OF THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS, A COUNTER INSURGENCY TRAINING SCHOOL OF THE U.S. ARMY AT FT. BENNING, GA.

SEVERAL WEEKS AGO, POPE FRANCIS DECLARED ROMERO A “MARTYR OF THE CHURCH,” OPENING THE WAY FOR HIM TO BE CANONIZED; AND EVEN THOUGH THERE IS MUCH JOY AND EXCITEMENT ABOUT THIS PROSPECT IN THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC COMMUNITY, WE KNOW THAT “SAN ROMERO” IS ALREADY A SAINT IN THE HEARTS OF THE SALVADORAN PEOPLE.

WE CELEBRATE ROMERO TODAY, NOT ONLY BECAUSE MARCH 24 IS THE 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS MARTYRDOM, BUT ALSO BECAUSE MONSIGNOR ROMERO IS A PERSON OF “FAITH THAT CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS.” HE WAS MURDERED FOR THE SAME REASON THAT JESUS AND REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. WERE KILLED: HE DARED SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER. HE DARED FACE THE DEMONS AND CALL THEM OUT.

IN TODAY'S SCRIPTURE LESSON, JESUS SAYS THAT FAITH IS THE FUNDAMENTAL REQUIREMENT OF THOSE WHO WOULD BE HEALERS AND EXORCISERS OF DEMONS. FROM JESUS' LIFE AND DEATH, WE UNDERSTAND THAT JESUS WAS SPEAKING NOT ONLY OF HEALING THE SICK; HE ALSO WAS ADDRESSING THOSE WHO WOULD CHALLENGE THE 'POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES' OF EMPIRE. EXORCISM OF ANY DEMON IS TOUGH AND DANGEROUS WORK, NOT TO BE UNDERTAKEN BY PEOPLE OF TEPID FAITH.

EACH SUNDAY MORNING, DURING THE THREE YEARS THAT ROMERO WAS ARCHBISHOP, HE LED MASS AT THE CATHEDRAL IN SAN SALVADOR. HIS HOMILY WAS BROACAST BY THE RADIO STATION OF THE CHURCH. IT IS SAID THAT FOR THIS HOUR ON SUNDAY MORNING, EVERY RADIO IN THE NATION WAS TUNED TO THE VOICE OF ARCHBISHOP ROMERO. THE MEDIA WERE CONTROLLED BY THE GENERALS AND THE OLIGARCHS, SO ROMERO'S WORDS WERE PRACTICALLY THE ONLY SOURCE OF TRUTH FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE SALVADORAN PEOPLE. TRUTH ABOUT WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THE CHAOS OF WAR THAT ENGULFED THEIR LIVES.

IN HIS SERMONS ROMERO CALLED OUT THE DEMONS. HE NAMED THE 'POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES'. HE CALLED THEM TO ACCOUNT FOR THEIR CRIMES AND SINS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST THE SALVADORAN PEOPLE.

ROMERO GAVE A WEELY REPORT ON WHAT WAS HAPPENING THROUGHOUT THE NATION – THE STRIKES AND DEMONSTRATIONS; THE MASSACRES; THE NAMES OF THE DISAPPEARED. HE IDENTIFIED THE BODIES AND THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR DEATHS. HE DESCRIBED HOW THEY HAD BEEN TORTURED AND MUTILATED. HE NAMED BOTH VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS.

HE TOLD OF THE ACTS OF BRAVERY OF THE SALVADORAN PEOPLE AND HOW THEY TRIED TO PROTECT ONE ANOTHER FROM THE SAVAGERY OF THE STATE.

HE BROUGHT PASTORAL WORDS OF COMFORT TO THE FAMILIES OF THE VICTIMS. HE SPOKE TO THE POPULAR ORGANIZATIONS WHOSE LEADERS WERE TARGETED FOR DISAPPEARANCE AND DEATH. HE SOUGHT TO ANIMATE JUSTICE AND DENOUNCE ABUSE AND VIOLENCE WHEREVER HE SAW IT. THROUGH HIS WEEKLY SERMON, MONSIGNOR ROMERO WAS PRIEST, PROPHET AND PASTOR TO THE PEOPLE OF EL SALVADOR.

THE DAY BEFORE HE HIMSELF WAS ASSASSINATED, ROMERO DIRECTED HIS HOMILY TO THE SOLDIERS OF THE SALVADORAN MILITARY WHO CARRIED OUT THE ATROCITIES ORDERED BY THEIR OFFICERS. ROMERO SPOKE THESE WORDS TO THE YOUNG CONSCRIPTS:

“BROTHERS, YOU ARE OUR PEOPLE. BEFORE YOU CARRY OUT ORDERS TO KILL YOUR BROTHER CAMPESINOS, REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE UNDER THE SOVERIGN GOD WHO COMMANDS 'THOU SHALL NOT KILL.' NO SOLDIER IS OBLIGED TO OBEY AN ORDER CONTRARY TO THE LAW OF GOD. NO ONE HAS TO COMPLY WITH A LAW THAT IS IMMORAL. NOW IS THE TIME TO RECOVER AND OBEY YOUR CONSCIENCE. THE CHURCH, DEFENDER OF THE LAW OF GOD AND THE DIGNITY OF MAN, CANNOT REMAIN SILENT BEFORE SUCH ABOMINATION. IN THE NAME OF GOD, IN THE NAME OF THIS SUFFERING PEOPLE WHOSE LAMENTATIONS RISE TO HEAVEN EACH DAY MORE TUMULTUOUS, I BESEACH YOU, I BEG YOU, I ORDER YOU, IN THE NAME OF GOD, STOP THE REPRESSION!”

SO, WHERE ARE YOU AND I IN THE STORY OF EMPIRE? ARE WE AT THE CENTER OF THE AMERICAN EMPIRE OR AT THE MARGIN? ARE WE CITIZENS WITH ACCESS TO POWER AND PRIVILEGE, OR PERSONS WITH FEW CHOICES, CONSIGNED TO THE SHADOWS? IF WE ARE NEAR THE CENTER, HOW DO WE ACCOMPANY THOSE AT THE MARGINS? AND HOW DOES MY PLACE IN THE EMPIRE IMPACT MY FAITH? THESE ARE DEMONS WITH WHICH I WRESTLE.

MONSIGNOR ROMERO UNDERSTOOD THAT THE POWER OF HIS FAITH WAS ROOTED IN THE FAITH OF THE MARGINALIZED AND PERSECUTED PEOPLE OF EL SALVADOR. HE UNDERSTOOD THAT THEIR RESISTANCE TO EMPIRE WAS AN ACT OF FAITH. HE SAID, “EL PUEBLO ES MI PROFETA.” (“THE PEOPLE ARE MY PROPHET.”) “IF THEY KILL ME, I WILL BE RESURRECTED IN THE SALVADORAN PEOPLE.”

MY LAST VISIT TO EL SALVADOR WAS FIVE YEARS AGO, MARCH OF 2010. I WAS THERE WITH TIM AND GLEN AND CHRIS SMITH AND STUDENTS FROM UTS.

WE WENT TO CELEBRATE THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MARTYRDOM OF MONSIGNOR ROMERO.

THE NIGHTMARE OF CIVIL WAR WAS OVER AT LAST. A TREATY OF PEACE BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE GUERRILLAS HAD BEEN SIGNED IN 1993; THE FORMER GUERILLAS WERE NOW A POLITCAL PARTY. INDEED, THEIR CANDIDATE HAD JUST BEEN ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC.

ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF ROMERO'S MARTYRDOM, THERE WAS A HUGE RALLY AND MARCH. EVEN THE NEWLY ELECTED PRESIDENT AND HIS WIFE JOINED THE MARCHERS AND ACCOMPANIED US TO THE CATHEDRAL. AND ALTHOUGH I WILL NOT BE THERE WITH THEM THIS TUESDAY, I KNOW THAT IN THE CITIES AND HAMLETS THROUGHOUT EL SALVADOR, THE FAITH OF THE PEOPLE WILL BE VIBRANT AND VISIBLE, AND ROMERO WILL BE PRESENT. JUST AS HE IS PRESENT WITH US THROUGH OUR SALVADORAN FRIENDS AND THE MANY BLESSINGS THEY HAVE BROUGHT TO THIS COMMUNITY – OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN, TO SERVE, TO WORK FOR JUSTICE, AND TO CELEBRATE! AS ROMERO PROMISED, HE HAS BEEN RESURECTED IN THE SALVADORAN PEOPLE. “THE NEW SOCIETY IS COMING,” HE PROCLAIMED; AND IT IS COMING WITH HASTE.” WITH FAITH SUCH AS THIS, WE, TOO, CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS. AMEN.