

**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Mark 1:29-39**

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**February 8, 2015**

**Problem in the Text**

Today's Gospel passage is a little problematic for preaching purposes because it is not one cohesive event, but rather a seemingly random list of things that happened in succession. It is Mark's account of Jesus' apparent first full day of ministry. Fresh from his baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus had called his disciples, taught with authority in the synagogue in Capernaum, and now seems to be getting into the meat of his work, which was proclaiming the Kingdom through healing and casting out demons. I was trying to paraphrase this passage and realized I had settled into a series of catch-phrases. Follow along with your bulletin and see if you can see them too, perhaps printed on a new line of Pro-Jesus t-shirts: As Jesus moved through the day I found, "Get out, get in there, get up, get serving, get moving, get in on it, heal it." To the demons: "Get out and Get with the program." The passage continues with a "what would Jesus do?" theme: "Get up again. Get away from it all. Get out there. Get praying." When the disciples find Jesus again "They are coming for me? Then let's keep moving, keep doing, keep being." I must say, it is exhausting being in ministry with Jesus.

There is a sense of urgency in Mark's gospel as Jesus begins to lean into ministry, as he teaches his disciples about the Kingdom through "doing." It's as if Jesus knew he had to squeeze a lot into a very little amount of time. Simon and the others found him to let Jesus know "Everyone is searching for you." This statement could have been about more people seeking to be healed, but that really would have been a "given" for Jesus. "They are searching for you" becomes more ominous in light of the fact that Jesus begins his ministry with the knowledge that John the Baptist had been arrested by the Romans. "Keep moving, keep doing, keep being" would have been more than a catch phrase on a t-shirt – it was the survival plan for Jesus and his disciples. Jesus needed to spread the news about the Kingdom as far and wide as he could, to transform the lives of as many people as possible. Get up, get out there, get serving, get moving. With each healing, each time Jesus stretched out his hand to make someone whole, to restore them from their brokenness and suffering under demons – his following grew. The news was spreading and he wanted people to experience it for themselves – to have their personal gospel witness. Jesus did not want people to hear his identity as the Son of God spread by demonic voices or even by those who had been healed. He wanted people to experience healing and wholeness first hand. Jesus wanted to take the experience of the encounter with God made man to the poor, to the sick, to those tortured by demons. Jesus took himself out to wherever the people were to tell and show them his message: Get some of THIS in your life. Maybe even the best Jesus t-shirt of all would be: There's more of this where I am.

**Problem in the World**

I have just returned from a six-day trip to El Salvador. Last weekend I witnessed and celebrated with the Anglican Episcopal Church of El Salvador the consecration of their new Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Juan David Alvarado Melgar. I had flown down with a small delegation from the Diocese of Virginia: Bishop Susan Goff, Rev. Catherine Campbell, Rev. Bernie Schroeder and me. During our six days in El Salvador, we were hosted by the Cristosal Foundation. We joined a group from the Diocese of Olympia and a few others from Central New York and Pennsylvania in a program Cristosal runs called "the Global School." We were immersed in Salvadorian history and culture and the work of the Anglican Episcopal Church. El Salvador is a small beautiful country that has suffered horribly. We saw the bullet hole in the clerical shirt a priest wore as he was shot while serving the poor in 1977. I stood at the altar and prayed where a priest was shot while preparing the Eucharist in 1980. We stood on ground that had been soaked in the blood of martyrs in 1989. We walked the length of a wall with the names of 30,000 people who had disappeared during the civil war in the eighties – many of them children. In 1979, a priest named Fr. Rutilio Grande was stopped by the military as he drove down a dirt road towards a poor village to celebrate a Sunday mass. He and three other passengers were executed at the side of the road. It was his clerical shirt we had seen in a museum for the martyrs of El Salvador. Fr. Rutilio was Archbishop Oscar Romero's clergy colleague and best friend. The shock of this murder was the catalyst which changed his Romero's life. A few years earlier, Romero had been made Archbishop with the blessing of the government because he had been a believer that the government was good and working on behalf of El Salvador. With the death of his friend, a good priest, Romero's eyes became open to the radical message of Christ for peace and justice for the poor.

Despite receiving death threats, Romero denounced the government and the army for their repressive policies. In his Sunday radio broadcast on March 23rd, 1980, Romero addressed the military and the government of El Salvador directly, saying "In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I

beg you, I implore you, I order you...in the name of God, stop the repression!" (23.03.80) The next day was a Monday. Romero was celebrating a small daily mass with the nuns with whom he lived in community at the Divine Providence Hospital. At the end of the homily, as the those gathered knelt in prayer and as Romero set the altar for the Eucharist, he paused, looked up and down the aisle toward the street and at the barrel of a rifle. A single bullet then pierced his heart. As we left the chapel where Romero was martyred, we could easily see from our bus the graffiti tags which mark the gang territories on the sides of buildings in the city today. The suffering continues. El Salvador has new demons to contend with who have taken up the old methods of terror and corruption to oppress the poor and vulnerable in the name of greed.

### **Grace in the Text**

In Mark's gospel we read that "Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever... [Jesus] came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." I wondered about how it must have felt for Simon's mother – to be sick and unable to get up out of bed to receive her son and his friends. When Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up, she was able to be herself in the fullest sense – she was able to serve them. It wasn't that she was able to get back to being a housewife, cleaning and cooking, and put back into her "place." Jesus healed her and she was able to serve in the sense of nurturing, providing, giving this band of disciples and their leader the support they needed to get their ministry in action. This was a one-person Mission and Outreach Committee, Chili Bowl Fundraiser, and Hoagie Sale!

"She served them." Simon's mother was healed and then able to use what she had to resource their ministry – to get Jesus out there and healing more people.

### **Grace in the World**

Jesus taught his disciples by doing. He seems to always be asking them "What have you learned? What will you now do?" Instead of losing hope when the government of El Salvador killed his friend, the Gospel took Archbishop Romero by the hand and lifted him up. He got busy and began to serve the poor, the sick and the hopeless oppressed of his country. He began to speak truth to power and truth to the people who listened to his Sunday sermons. "In 1979, the number of people being killed rose to more than 3000 per month. Oscar Romero...[offered]...faith and hope. He continued to use the radio broadcast of his Sunday sermons to tell people what was happening throughout the country, to talk about the role of the Church, and to offer his listeners hope that they would not suffer and die in vain." (Caritas Australia, *Bio of Oscar Romero*, July 2013.) Romero spoke these prophetic words in his final homily to the nuns and other hospital workers who had gathered for the mass: "Those who surrender to the service of the poor through love of Christ will live like the grain of wheat that dies... The harvest comes because of the grain that dies." Romero had said earlier that same year that "I do not believe in death without resurrection," he said. "If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people." Romero's death, which was so brazenly carried out by the government, began the end of their grip of fear on El Salvador as the world and the Salvadorian people called for justice. I can tell you that in the face of gang violence and corruption that is part of El Salvador's daily reality, the Church is fueled by Romero's witness and continues to be the agent of healing and hope for the people. Last Sunday the Virginia delegation celebrated mass with the new bishop at St. Andrew's parish. Bishop Juan David Alvarado spoke to us about how the Church's greatest resource is its people and their heart to serve and proclaim Christ in their world. We met with a women's cooperative that has called itself "Spirit without Borders." They are still in their first few months of working together, but the women of this little parish in a poor neighborhood has already done a lot of work. They are about to open a "homework center" where for a small fee, neighborhood children can come and use computers to do homework or get tutoring. They will soon open a café. They've taken an inventory of what each woman can bring from their kitchens to get this little café up and running. The profits will go to support this after-school program and any extra will be pooled together as an emergency fund for women to borrow from in crisis. All will be done with prayer and Bible study as the foundation from which these women draw their strength and energy. They are taking Jesus's hand, getting up and serving one another and their community.

On the way home on the plane, the news came out that Archbishop Oscar Romero had been beatified by Pope Francis and will most likely be named a saint in the next year. I feel like I was somehow personally blessed by this news, to have been in El Salvador at such an historical time. I don't know where the experience will take me. I don't know where the witness I give you about the ministry and hope of the Diocese of El Salvador and her people will take us. What I do know is that Jesus continues to offer his hand – its healing touch and powerful lift up, energizing people to get up, get out, and to serve in his name.

Amen.