

THE VICTORIOUS DEFEAT

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March 18, 2018, 5th Sunday in Lent, Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

***“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,
will draw all people to myself.”***

John 12:32

It happened in the City of Our Savior, capital of the country of Our Savior — San Salvador, capital of the Central American nation, El Salvador. The year was 1980. The Archbishop had been on retreat all day with a group of his fellow priests. That evening, he went to celebrate Mass at the chapel of a small Roman Catholic hospital dedicated to the care of cancer patients. He preached a sermon on the same Gospel text we just heard: focusing on the line, *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*

The Archbishop, Oscar Romero, had been outspoken in his support of peasants who were being murdered daily by death squads organized by the government. He’d gotten himself in trouble with the ruling elite by directly appealing to U.S. President Jimmy Carter. He asked him to cut off military aid to El Salvador until the killings stopped.

That evening Archbishop Romero concluded his sermon with these words, that he addressed directly to members of the National Guard, the police and the

army. The sermon was being broadcast on the radio, so there was a possibility some of those people were actually listening. He reminded them that the people they were killing were just like them, fellow citizens of the same country. Then he said this:

“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.”

Moments later the Archbishop stepped behind the altar to celebrate the sacrament. A car pulled up outside the church. A man got out, holding a rifle. He slipped in through a back door, took aim at the Archbishop standing behind the altar, and shot him through the heart. The gunman fled. Nuns who were nurses at the hospital ran forward to help him, but there was nothing they could do. The Archbishop died there, on the floor of the church. No one has ever been prosecuted for his murder.

A quarter of a million people came to his funeral. The streets outside the cathedral were thronged with mourners. Suddenly, smoke bombs exploded amidst the crowd. Shots rang out, as snipers on the roofs of nearby buildings, including the National Palace, fired directly into the crowd. Many said the shooters were members of the military in civilian clothes, but no one can say for certain. Somewhere between 30 and 50 people died that day. No one was ever brought to

justice for those killings either.

Just last week — maybe you saw it in the news — Pope Francis announced that he has approved the canonization of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador — city of Our Savior, in the country of Our Savior. *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*

What was it that led Jesus to say such a thing?

As John tells the story, a group of Greeks had approached Jesus’ disciple Philip, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Now, Philip is a Greek name. No doubt, they knew he spoke their language.

It’s possible that these Greeks — and even Philip himself — were members of a faction within Judaism known as the God Fearers. These were people who followed the traditions of Judaism but were not themselves of Jewish birth. Most of them were Greeks or Romans. They studied the Law of Moses, worshiped in the Temple (in the outer Court of the Gentiles) and did the best they could to follow Jewish teachings. But they were never accepted as full members of the family. The men among them would have had to be circumcised, and few men were willing to undergo that rite. So they looked on longingly, from afar — always on the fringes

of the community.

In the community of Jesus-followers, such distinctions didn't seem to matter. Jesus, they had heard, would welcome anyone. Philip was one of the Twelve, was he not? Maybe he would provide them an introduction.

Philip went to Andrew, and the two of them went to Jesus, telling him some Greeks wanted to talk to him.

We don't know if they ever did — if they ever got to see Jesus — because John doesn't tell us. He just tells how Jesus began talking in vague terms about his own death. Should he pray to God to “save him from this hour?”

Jesus turns his eyes heavenward and says, “Father, glorify your name.” There comes, then, a voice from heaven, saying “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” To some in the crowd it sounds like distant thunder. To others it seems like the voice of an angel.

“Now is the judgment of this world,” Jesus goes on. “Now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

“*All* people” — maybe that's his answer to the Greeks. Now is not the time to meet with them. Now, his time of spiritual struggle is beginning. Those Greeks don't understand — no one understands — the war within him, the struggle of

temptation, the need for solitude, the desire to pray to God saying, “Lord, let this cup pass from me.”

A few verses beyond the passage I read for you, John concludes this story. He does it in a strange way. Jesus charges the crowd around him to walk in the light always, and then, “After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.” So we don’t know if Philip and Andrew ever succeeded in introducing those Greeks to Jesus.

It hardly matters, though, because those Greeks will learn soon enough — everyone will learn soon enough — just how much Jesus loves them, and all the children of God. They will learn it by observing his death on the cross. “For God so loved *the world* — not just the Jews, the chosen people, but *the world* — that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him — *whoever* — will have eternal life.”

The sign that seals the deal is the cross of Christ. The cross does continue speak to people the world over, to draw them to him, like iron filings to a magnet. It spoke — and speaks still — to the suffering people of El Salvador, inspired 38 years later by the story of their martyred Archbishop, soon to be named a saint. Those people know what the cross is all about.

It speaks, as well, to you and me here today, in free and affluent America.

Though none of us need fear being shot by a death squad when we leave our houses in the morning, our lives are not immune from suffering. Pain is part of the human condition. And, for all of us, death is inevitable. It *is* a comfort to know that, when God became human in Jesus Christ, he didn't claim a free pass. He lived the same life we live, and died a death that was far worse than any we are likely to experience when our days are ended.

It is this awareness that, as today's scripture text says, draws all people to him, the crucified one.

Jesus is such an influential figure, the world over, that other religions have had to come to terms with him. Yet none of the other great religions, in the way they appropriate the teachings of Jesus, get the full picture. This is because none of them fully wrestle with the reality of the cross.

There are some within Judaism, for example, who honor Jesus as a learned rabbi and a teller of wise parables. But they don't acknowledge him as Messiah because there's no room in their way of thinking for a Messiah who dies. The Muslims, too, honor Jesus after a fashion, but they consider the story of his death an affront to Allah. There are Hindus who consider Jesus to be a peaceful *samahdi*, a wise yogi who escapes the wheel of karma: but not a crucified savior.

The popular Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, once said of the cross that it is “a very painful image to me; it does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus.”

Yes, the cross is “a very painful image,” but true followers of Jesus do not shrink from it. For we know it as the perilous door through which our Lord had to pass, in order to procure salvation for all who trust in him. He has passed through the door between death and new life, and he has left it open for us: such is the witness of his resurrection.

The cross is, on the face of it, a symbol of failure: of utter and abject defeat. As he rode into Jerusalem on the back of that donkey, to the cheers and adulation of the crowd, Jesus looked to be a winner. But, as we all know, it would be but a few days before he’d lost everything, even his life.

There is no other religion but Christianity that so courageously grasps hold of this symbol of failure and doesn’t let go until the curse is transformed into a blessing. When this happens, the cross is for us no longer a dread instrument of death, but a symbol of victory: an object of devotion.

Jesus says, in today’s scripture, that he is going to *draw* all people to himself. The Greek word, *elkuo*, John uses is an ordinary term for something that’s

pulled or hauled in. But Jesus isn't saying, here, that he's going to drag all people to him, screaming and kicking. No, it's far more gentle than that, more winsome. It's a kind of attraction, like a magnetic attraction. The wonder of the cross — the symbol of defeat transformed into victory — speaks to the deepest part of our hearts. It beckons us onward. It invites us in. It attracts us, as a magnet draws steel.

When I think of magnets, the image that comes to my mind is the sort of heavy bar magnets we used in elementary-school science class. Remember those? Each magnet had two poles, positive and negative. Put the positive and negative poles of two bar magnets anywhere near each other, and they snap together. It's hard to separate them.

Put positive and positive together, though — or negative and negative — and they repel each other. With a bit of effort, you can pull two like poles together, but you can't make them stay there.

The relationship between us and Jesus is similar. Yes, the image of his triumph on the cross — that victorious defeat — ultimately draws all people to himself: for isn't that what we all want out of life and death? But there are certain times and seasons of life when we may align ourselves against the purposes of God. We may imagine we don't need God — that we can do it all ourselves. A person who's pridefully determined to be an independent, self-sufficient, self-

made man or woman may take one look at the cross of Christ and find it to be repellent, a turn-off, a real downer.

What this says to me — this image of the magnetic Jesus, who draws all people to himself — is reassuring, because it takes the pressure off us when it comes to sharing the good news about him with other people. If Jesus on the cross is drawing people to himself, we don't need to force or pressure them to enter into relationship with him. All we need do is to issue a gentle invitation, and tell them something of our own story of faith. Bring the complimentary pole of their magnet close to him, and the force of magnetism will do the rest.

If, on the other hand, they are hostile to the faith, then there's little you or I can do to overcome that natural repulsion. Maybe, at some later point in life, their magnet will be turned around and they'll begin to feel the attraction. For that reason, it's not wise to ever give up on them. But, until that re-alignment happens, there's little we can do to force it.

Let me share with you now one other implication of that bar-magnet analogy. If you take a magnet that's powerful enough, and you strap another piece of metal right up against it for a long enough period of time, that metal will become magnetized. It, too, will become a magnet. Somehow, the magnetic force leaps the gap, and the other piece of metal becomes imbued with the magnet's

power.

Then it, too, can attract others. It, too, can deliver others to the one source of all attraction.

That's what so often happens when Christians live their lives, over time, in close proximity to Jesus. Some of his magnetism rubs off. Other people look at such a person's life and say, "I want some of that."

One of the hardest places to be a Christian — and to operate as a Christian church — during the twentieth century was in the former East Germany. Christianity was not illegal in that country, but the Communist government put so many restrictions on the church that it was difficult to spread the good news. Churches were forbidden, for example, to put up any signs that would help people even find their places of worship.

Some young people in the church found a unique way to evangelize. They started wearing T-shirts that displayed the slogan, "Folgen Sie Mir am Gott" or "Follow Me To God." Those young people became walking billboards for the church and living directional signs pointing people to Jesus. When the Berlin Wall finally came down, and the authoritarian Communist government faded away, it was church people who were largely responsible.

Those East German churches had no advantages. Their buildings were drab

and hard to find. They couldn't advertise in any conventional way. Some of those Christians even suffered for their faith, under government persecution. They were defeated in so many ways. But, by the power of God, in the midst of that defeat they were victorious — just like their Savior on his cross. And that made all the difference.

There's a place where the Apostle Paul writes about this sort of victorious defeat. It's in the fourth chapter of Second Corinthians. Here's what he says: **“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.”**

It's the essence of Christian witness. And it's the only way this church, or any other church, will ever grow: by example. By bringing other people into range of Jesus' magnetic attraction. By doing what Philip and Andrew did, in the Gospel story we've been studying.

There are people out there who are saying to us — maybe not directly, but in some indirect fashion — “We wish to see Jesus.” The task of all of us is to bring them to him, so the magnetism of the cross can take over, and do its work.

Won't you join me in being part of that joyful work?

Let us pray:

**Draw us nearer to your cross, O Lord:
not that we may dwell on your suffering,
but that we may glory in your victory.
And may it be so that,
as we come to know you better,
others may come to know you through us. Amen.**

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