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Pentecost 23C
Peace, Seattle
October 13, 2013
Luke 17:11-19

COMMUNITY OF PAIN & HOPE

So, what is this gospel story finally about?

Gratitude? I've certainly preached that before.
- How gratitude makes our lives more whole,
- how living with gratitude pulls us out of the slumps we can find ourselves in when illness lingers or relationships founder or life just goes to pot.

Ten are cured, but one receives the full measure of Christ's gift, because he caught on to something that had eluded the others: He caught on to gratitude.

Gratitude is a gift this story highlights, no doubt. But it's not the only one.

This text also teaches us that healing is more often a process that unfolds over time, than a sudden, miraculous event.

Luke's telling of the story emphasizes this. Unlike healing stories where Jesus lays his hands on the seeker, here he has no physical contact with the ten lepers.

Instead, he simply commands them: GO SHOW YOURSELVES TO THE PRIESTS. And they go. As they first turn from Jesus to begin their journey down the road, nothing about their condition has changed. But then, Luke tells us, AS THEY WENT—while they were on the way—THEY WERE MADE CLEAN.

As Paul Duke has said:

> Transformations almost always occur somewhere down the road, somewhere between hearing the command and reaching its destination…The Word doesn't heal us; it commands us down a path to where healing overtakes us.[1]

This past week, yet another approach to unpacking this story was brought to my attention, and it came from an unanticipated source.

Bishop Medardo Gomez of the Lutheran Church of El Salvador is in Seattle this weekend and he's preaching this morning at Grace Lutheran in Des Moines. Since 2009, Grace has had a sister church relationship with Rutilio Grande Lutheran Church in the community of San Jose Buena Vista, El Salvador, and they invited Bishop Gomez to come and celebrate that relationship, and so he came.

On Thursday, Bishop Gomez joined the pastors of the Seatac Cluster at our monthly gathering, and we shared our thoughts on today's gospel, shared bread and wine, and then had lunch together.

Bishop Gomez has long been on my radar screen.
He became the Bishop of the Lutheran Church of El Salvador in 1986, the year I was ordained, and I recall his visit soon afterward to the synod where I was serving at the time.
This was during the years, some of you will recall, when newspapers regularly bore headlines of ongoing strife in the nations south of our border.

[1] *Down the Road and Back*, *Christian Century*, 9/27-10//4, 1995, p. 883.

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The condition of landless peasants, the exploitation of land and labor on the part of US multinationals, state sponsored violence in the form of death squads, and the clandestine flow of arms from U.S. sources (remember the Iran-Contra affair?), created a deadly mix that led to the death of 10's of thousands.

Though the church hierarchy had historically aligned itself with the interests of the wealthy elite, a new theology was bubbling up from below, a theology of liberation, that offered both a critique of the status quo and an interpretation of the Scriptures which affirmed God was on the side of the marginalized.

El Salvador was one of the epicenters both of unrest and of courage.
One of the greatest champions of the poor was Archbishop Oscar Romero, who, as an outspoken critic of state sponsored violence, received constant death threats. He refused to be cowed by them.

In 1980, Archbishop Romero was assassinated while he presided at the altar.
Later that same year, four R.C. nuns and a laywoman were murdered by death squads.

Religious leaders throughout the country who sought to embody Christ's ministry to the poor and to advocate for justice on their behalf, became targets of state sponsored terror.

Like his childhood pastor, Oscar Romero, Medardo Gomez was an outspoken advocate for the poor majority in the late 1970s. Under his leadership, the Lutheran Church in El Salvador grew during the late '70s and throughout the war years because of its commitment to the poor.[2]

In 1983 Pastor Gomez was detained and tortured for speaking out. In 1989, three years after being elected Bishop, in the wake of the massacre of six Jesuit priests and their housekeepers, he was forced into exile in the United States.

One of the most fascinating stories to come out of that dark time was the story of the Subversive Cross.[3] I want to share that story this morning.

The parish Bishop Gomes served, and continues to serve, Iglesia Luterana La Resurrección, Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in San Salvador, has a cross in its sanctuary that has become something of an icon—not because of it's beauty or intricate design—it's actually made of cardboard—but because of its history.

During worship a few weeks before his exile, Bishop Gomes led his parishioners in an exercise asking them to write on the cross what sins they thought were being nailed to that cross with Jesus, so they did.[4]

- HUNGER, they wrote
- PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH
- DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN.

Sins from LYING to MURDER were written on this cross and when the cross was finished, the people committed themselves to work for forgiveness and for liberation. They would forgive, but they would speak out all the more.

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[2]From an account by Nancy Goede, shared on her blog: http://goedevondracek.homestead.com/MedardoGomezandtheSubversiveCross.html.html
[3] Michael Rinehart, Bishop of the Texas-Louisiana-Gulf Coast Synod of the ELCA, wrote about his journey to El Salvador in September 2011. His retelling of this story of the subversive cross forms the core of what I share here. Find his blog entry @ http://bishopmike.com/2011/09/18/medardo-gomez/
[4] From an account by Nancy Goede, shared on her blog: http://goedevondracek.homestead.com/ElSalvadorWelcome.html

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Soon afterward, Bishop Gomez fled the country. When soldiers came looking for him, he was not to be found. They cursed, and told those present that they'd come to assassinate him.

The soldiers arrested 3 Salvadorans and 12 foreigners. They also took the cross with them, for they saw it as a subversive symbol of resistance. The cross was imprisoned.
This simple, passive symbol seemed to have power.

When Lutheran pastors and parishioners were arrested and questioned, and sometimes tortured, they reported after their release that this Subversive Cross was in the interrogation room with them.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? their interrogators would ask them, pointing to the cross.

In 1992 a Peace Accord was signed, the Salvadoran Civil War came to an end, and Bishop Gomez returned to El Salvador. He asked the U.S. Ambassador to help free the cross.
The Ambassador appealed to the President of El Salvador, and that crude cardboard cross made its way from the prison to the Presidential palace.

The soldiers had unwittingly carried this symbol, pointing out the sins of the government, from military prison right into the President's House. Arrangements were made, and the cross was returned to the church of the Resurrection, where it stands today.[5]

SO…Here I was, then, last Thursday, sitting across from Bishop Gomez, a person I've deeply admired for his courage and faithfulness under fire.

After we'd read the Gospel for today, and several of us shared our thoughts about it, Bishop Gomez raised his hand to speak.

What he drew our attention to in the story was something I'd never really considered before.

It was the shared pain those ten lepers experienced, he said, the physical and social pain exacted by their disease—that drew them into community. And in that community of shared pain, paradoxically, they also came to know hope.

That hope propelled them to reach out to Jesus. And their reaching was rewarded.

Later that afternoon, I went to see Oh-sah Lofgren, who's been on our prayer list for a long time now. For over three months she's suffered from shingles. And though her recent bout with pneumonia is at an end, still she longs for release from the attacks of pain that her condition keeps bringing on.

What can we say to one another in the face of suffering? We pray for release and for the ability to trust that Christ has not forgotten us but joins us in suffering.

> "Even in the midst of suffering," said Bishop Gomez, "we may find ourselves in the midst of a gift. That gift is the unity that comes from being part of a consoling community of Jesus Christ; that gift is the community of faith, a sacramental community of consolation and comforting that can only be found among brothers and sisters in Christ."[6]

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[5] "The Subversive Cross is an artifact from the past, but current events confirm that violent persecution is an ongoing reality for Christians in El Salvador. In January of 2005, a guard at Lutheran University, Manuel Jesús Martinez, was tortured and killed, his bound body hung from a tree. The killers stole thirty computers and many documents, audio equipment, cash and an official vehicle. Bishop Gomez was quoted by many media sources after the killings saying that he believes that the killing was not just armed robbery, but retaliation for his outspoken criticism of El Salvador's leadership. Although many groups in El Salvador and the United States have called for an investigation, there are still no suspects in the case." http://bishopmike.com/2011/09/18/medardo-gomez/

[6] These remarks by Bishop Gomez were given on another occasion, on a visit to the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia following the events of September 11, 2001. They are also germane to his reading of today's gospel text. See: http://archive.ltsp.edu/news_events/2001-2002/010911tragedy/0111gomez.html

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If we want to follow Christ in the world, we need to go where there is suffering, for that is where Christ reveals himself as the SUBVERSIVE SAVIOR on a SUBVERSIVE CROSS; calling us to gather ever more closely in a community of consolation and liberation. Thanks be to God.

Amen.