

*Living the Dream: Release the Outcome*

Jeremiah 32:36-41

*Release the outcome.* We come today to the fourth and final step of the *contemplative stance*, that rule of life that can put us in a posture to be part of God's dream for the earth. These last three weeks we've talked about the other three steps: *Show up, pay attention, cooperate with God.* Today it's the final piece: *release the outcome.*

A couple of weeks ago, when Brittany was teaching our children the body prayer that is helping us remember this stance, she explained what it means to release the outcome in a way the youngest among us can understand. 'When you do something,' she said, 'don't try to control what other people do. You can only control yourself.' She was so right. That's a perfect way to explain 'release the outcome' to a four or six year old.

For us, it's a little more complicated. And it should be. The world doesn't work exactly the way we understood it when we were six. Nothing does—not science, or human beings. Also not the Bible, or God. It's actually not true that we learned everything we need to know in kindergarten. A life of faith is more than basic common sense and how to share. If we are getting everything we need to know about how to live as people of faith from the children's sermon, we might be selling God a little bit short.

A life of faith is meant to draw us out into deeper water. This topic—what it means to *release the outcome* of our actions and intentions—is a perfect example of that. Letting go of our expectations about what's supposed to happen next isn't encouragement to live unconsciously or irresponsibly. It's an invitation to clarity. Focus on what is yours to do; trust that God is in charge of the rest.

Today I want to tell you about Archbishop Oscar Romero. In 2018, Pope Francis named him a saint of the Catholic Church. Sometimes Oscar Romero is called a modern day martyr; he was assassinated in 1980, killed by a single shot as he stood behind a communion table in a tiny church in San Salvador. As Archbishop, he presided over all the churches in El Salvador. He enraged the Salvadoran government because of his outspoken criticism of the way it treated the poor. To silence him, they killed him.

Romero had not always been radical. For many years, actually, he served the Church quietly. He was a careful and compliant priest—popular with the people he served, always inclined to follow the policies set in Rome. He didn't have much to say about issues of social justice; his concern was religion.

But all around him, all around his church, El Salvador was moving toward more repressive and authoritarian government, institutionalizing its patterns of injustice. Laws were made to protect the rights of a few families to hold a huge percentage of the country's usable land. More and more people went hungry, lost their homes, slept in muddy fields. Hundreds of thousands died because they could not get basic medicines. Sixty percent of the country's babies died at birth. Armed security forces enforced these laws. Farm workers were beaten or shot if they were found

eating a piece of produce they had picked. In the name of law and order, the police shot peaceful protestors. It was as if the country was trying to eliminate poverty by killing all the poor people.

In 1977, just a month after he'd been made an Archbishop, a good friend of Romero's, another priest, was murdered. That priest had dared to help farmworkers organize. Seeing his friend's death shifted something inside Oscar Romero. His eyes opened. He paid attention to things he had not seen, or wanted to see, before. He began to use his position to speak out publicly, to speak for the people who had no voice. He said out loud that the government was torturing the poor, systematically killing them. He named the injustice of a system that had privileged him but left others behind. He criticized not only the Salvadoran government, but the United States military aid that supported its violence. He appealed to the Pope, and to President Jimmy Carter. In turn Romero was vilified, torn into—by his colleagues, the press, the government, the leaders of his own Church.

He would not stop. He didn't stop. On March 23, 1980, Archbishop Romero spoke directly to the young men in the military. "I want to make a special appeal to soldiers, national guardsmen, policemen," he said. "You are one of us. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When a man tells 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, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you; in the name of God I command you to stop..."

One day later, as he was reciting mass from behind the communion table in his own church, a single hired assassin entered from the back of the church and shot Oscar Romero in the heart.

But even an Archbishop's act of self-sacrifice does not always change the world. 250,000 people attended Romero's funeral a week later. While they were there smoke bombs went off. Rifles were fired into the crowd. Almost 50 people died. He must have guessed something like that would happen.

Here's the point. With no guarantee of the outcome, Archbishop Oscar Romero did what he felt called to do, to say. He was free to *cooperate with God* because what mattered was something more than the outcome of his own actions. On the morning before he died, he told a journalist, "...as a Christian I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me I will rise again in the people of El Salvador."

To release the outcome, to take action with no clear calculation of what it will produce, does mean knowing we can't control other people. But it's more than that. To risk something big for something good requires us to believe in something bigger than ourselves. It asks us to trust that our hope for what will be, the well-being of the people we love, the safety of the universe, is held well already, in the hands of God. A God we have never seen, most of us. But it's the same God who said to Jeremiah, just as the invading army approached the gates of the city,

*I will never to stop treating them graciously.*

...

*I will rejoice in treating them graciously,*

*and I will plant them in this land faithfully  
and with all my heart and being.*

Can you trust God's promise enough to act as though it's true? As though God's intentions are what matters?

There's a poem that's often called the Oscar Romero prayer. It wasn't written by him; it was written by a Canadian Bishop named Ken Untener. But it holds, I think, the wisdom and courage of Archbishop Oscar Romero, his willingness to cooperate with God and leave the outcome in God's hands. This is that prayer.

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.  
The Kingdom [of God] is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent  
enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of  
saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.*

*No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.*

...

*No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.  
This is what we are about.*

*We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an  
opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master  
builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

May it be so for us.