



“Oscar”

BY BILL NABERS

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” **Romans 8:35-38 NRSV**

“Free at last, they took your life. They could not take your pride. In the name of love. What more in the name of love.” Bono from **“Pride (in the name of Love)”**

Oscar. No, not the statues they give out at the Academy Awards. But Oscar Romero. Oscar Romero y Galdamez, Archbishop of San Salvador. Oscar Romero, martyr and champion of the poor and oppressed. Oscar Romero now (as of October 2018) a Saint of the Roman Catholic Church. (The ELCA Lutherans had added Romero to our list of Commemorations by 2006.)

Saint Oscar Romero, you may remember him. He was assassinated on March 24, 1980, at the altar while leading a Mass in San Salvador. He was murdered by a death squad operating under the authority of the government of El Salvador. That same government was backed and protected by two different USA administrations. The USA government was so afraid of possible “communists” in Latin America that it was willing to “overlook” the massive crimes being committed and tried to bury the truth. It took the killing of an American nun by those same death squads to begin to bring these issues before the public. Doesn’t that sound like a headline straight out of today’s news?

Oscar Romero was no communist. (And why is that anytime anyone takes up the cause of the poor and oppressed they get labeled as a communist or socialist? Aren’t we also trying to cover up the truth with labels?) Romero was actually fairly conservative. But faced with the oppression of the poor, torture, death squads, and the assassination of priests and

nuns he felt that he could not be silent. He made the Church the voice of the truth. The state run media only broadcast “faux news”. Romero told people the truth. He became an outspoken activist. He knew the risks and spoke in the last year of his life about his own impending death to his friends.

And yet he persevered. Why? Because of his faith. He had read the Bible. He knew of God’s love of the oppressed and the martyrdom of those who dared tell the truth. He knew Jesus’s teachings, including the Sermon on the Mount. He knew that Jesus had not been killed by the outcasts or atheists but by the religious and government authorities who considered him a threat. Romero had studied Church history. He knew of the long line of martyrs and those who suffered for standing up for the poor and oppressed. This care for the outcast, poor and oppressed is not optional for those who claim Jesus as Lord. Neither is risk and opposition.

Romero represented the best part of the Roman Catholic tradition as it relates to liberation and preference for the poor. Pope Francis wrote this of Romero in 2015, “His ministry was distinguished by his particular attention to the most poor and marginalized.” The Pope was under pressure to not honor Romero from some inside the church and several governments that still whisper terms like “communist” and “liberation theology.” The Pope ignored that and pressed ahead with the canonization (sainthood) process.

(If it is not improper, this Lutheran pastor would like to give the Pope a high five for that act of defiance.) I think the Pope recognized both the relevance of Romero for 2018 in our need for brave Christians to champion the outcasts in our own time and place. It is for people like Romero that I give thanks for this Thanksgiving season.

I had planned to write about Romero before the events of Jamal Khashoggi’s martyrdom for his work as a journalist. As I write this, that cover-up is well underway. I think of both Romero’s assassination and our government’s lack of courage and commitment to the truth some 38 years ago. Have we changed so little in all that time?

It is an interesting irony to note that the UN in 2010 proclaimed that March 24th, (Romero’s martyrdom day and now saint day) was to be the “International Day for the right to the Truth concerning Human Rights Violations and for the dignity of victims.” This was done to honor Romero. Now we can add Khashoggi’s name to that struggle. Paul’s words from the eighth chapter of Romans that are quoted at the very beginning of this column, are just as relevant today as when he wrote them some 2,000 years ago.

As all of this was swirling around in my brain; I kept hearing Bono sing the U2 song whose lyrics are also quoted. We usually associate that song with the late Rev. Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. He is referenced in the song. But I also hear are references in that song to Jesus Christ, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others. Maybe even Oscar Romero? It would not surprise me if U2 does not dedicate that song to the memory of Jamal Khashoggi as they sing it on their current world tour.

Are you ready for one more irony? As I was researching Oscar Romero’s life I came upon a photograph of an Oscar statue. No, not the one given for excellence in movies but a statue of Oscar Romero for a life died and lived well. He is depicted as one of the 20th century’s ten martyrs in statues above the great West Door of Westminster Abby in London, England. The photo I found depicts three of those martyrs. Oscar Romero is in the middle of the photo. He is surrounded on the left by Martin Luther King, Jr and on the right by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer and King are two of the most influential people from the 20th century in my life and thinking. It is appropriate that I add Oscar Romero to that list. But the similarities are also striking. We forget looking from our perspective that all three of these met with strong opposition and were unpopular in their own times (and that condemnation exists still today for all three.) None of them wanted to die but were true to their callings and principles. All dared to speak the truth to authorities. (From what I can tell that also applies to Jamal.)

So this Thanksgiving season let us give thanks for Oscar, Martin and Dietrich, Jamal and the unknown martyrs and all who suffer for the outcasts by proclaiming the truth. But let us move beyond that. Speaking especially to those who follow Jesus Christ; are we willing to be unpopular and face opposition (though I hope none of us is martyred) for the sake of the least and most vulnerable among us? It is also our calling and the visible hope of our world. Amen.