

**March 11, 2018**

**TEXT: John 2:13–22**

**TITLE: Destructive Duty**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

There's an old saying you may have heard before: *You have to crack some eggs if you want to make an omelet.* It's a way of saying that if you want to make something, often something else has to be destroyed. A child playing with blocks has to knock down what she made if she wants to build something new. The church we're sitting in was only possible because the prior church building was first demolished. Destruction and creation are closely related.

Tearing something down in order to build something up makes sense on a rational level. We tell ourselves, "That's the price of progress. The old has to give way to the new." But sometimes the tearing down is hard and messy. Sometimes the destruction isn't desired by everyone. Sometimes overturning the tables and changing how things have always been done leads to angry reactions—even violent ones. Remember that Jesus' actions in the temple eventually led to his crucifixion on a cross.

Starting on Tuesday, I'm honored to be teaching at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary up the road. The class is "Church & Society 01." The fundamental question we'll be exploring is how faith and culture relate to one another. Think about that for a moment. Is culture so bad we should run away from it, like monks in the desert or Amish in their buggies? Or is culture great and religious faith simply is one part of the rich tapestry of life? Is culture OK but dangerous and thus should be kept at arm's length whenever possible, or are there parts of culture and learning that can help us develop a rational, thoughtful faith? Perhaps all four of those options true to some degree, but in the end, culture is a garden into which we've been planted. God is the divine gardener, who tends the wheat and the weeds by God's own providential care. There—you've just heard a summary of about two weeks of lectures and an entire book by H. Richard Niebuhr.

Culture and faith are interwoven. Yet even with their interdependence, faith is something more than culture because God is something more than life. Thus, to get to where God is, some things have to be left behind. To follow where Christ leads, some cultural things have to be pushed aside, overturned, even destroyed.

That can be hard. Such choices can be messy and controversial. For example, too often in America we are tempted to equate faith with patriotism. Pledging allegiance to our nation is not the same as professing allegiance to God. We should respect our flag as a symbol of our national union, but flags have no place in sanctuaries devoted to worshiping the God of all nations. It is important to honor those who serve in the armed forces and take care of our veterans, but that can never lead to rubber-stamping ever-increasing military budgets or a hesitancy to proclaim that we follow the Prince of Peace, not the dogs of war. To confuse "patriotism" with "Presbyterian" in this way is to clutter our church with icons and false idols. When that happens, we cannot be

surprised when Christ comes toward us with a whip of cords, wreaking destruction and judgment today just as he did in the temple long ago.

The priorities of American society invade the church gradually, subtly, like small weeds in the corner of a garden. They come claiming their innocence, how they will help us do our ministry better—how we can be more efficient in our outreach by targeting people who all look the same and earn sufficient wages—how people love upbeat prosperity messages over “downer” Lenten sermons. That is why it is so important to listen to other voices of faith from around the world.

Oscar Romero was born in 1917, one of seven children in a poor El Salvadoran family. He became a priest in 1942 and began quietly to serve parishes in his troubled homeland. Romero was considered a conservative priest, and as he slowly was given higher positions of authority, the more radical priests were none too happy with him. In 1977, he was named Archbishop for that region, which included weekly radio addresses of his sermons. But one month into his tenure, something changed dramatically for Romero.

A friend and fellow priest named Rutilio Grande would speak out on behalf of the poor *campesino* children in his parish, insisting that the large landowners' dogs ate better than the children of the fieldworkers. One night Grande was ambushed and killed along with two church members. Romero went to Grande's funeral and saw the stoic endurance and fear etched into the faces of the people who packed the small country church. Their eyes asked the simple question: Will you stand with us as Grande did? On that night, Romero learned that the church is more than a theology or an institution. The church is the people, the body of Christ. He began to use his sermons, his weekly radio addresses, to bring the human rights abuses to light—to break the silence and overturn the tables. He couldn't stop the violence. Literally thousands would die from the fighting. All Romero could offer was the promise of faith—that the cross and resurrection are the seeds of hope planted in us. And even if that seed dies, it will still live and produce a great harvest by the grace of God. Out of destruction comes a new creation.

Romero knew his life was in danger, but he felt called to be, as he put it, a voice for those who have no voice. One evening he preached a powerful sermon, calling upon, even begging the army to stop the repression of their sisters and brothers. The next day, March 24, 1980, while Romero was leading mass, he finished his sermon and began to consecrate the bread that it may be understood as the body of Christ. In that moment, a gunman fired a single shot killing Oscar Romero at the altar. The blood of Christ and the blood of the Archbishop were intermingled on the church floor that day.

No one has ever been charged with Romero's assassination. But a United Nations commission linked the shooting to an army officer, Roberto D'Aubuisson, who trained at the notorious US military college called the School of the Americas in Ft. Benning, Georgia—and which today still trains military leaders for work in Latin America, often in support of unjust regimes.

Dom Helder Camara, who was archbishop in Brazil about the same time as Archbishop Romero, once noted that when he asks for donations of bread, people think he is a saint, but when he asks why there are poor people who need bread, they think he is a communist. Sometimes there is a duty placed before us to do things that are disruptive, even destructive, in order that something faithful and life-giving can emerge. Eggs are cracked to make omelets. Tables are overturned and old habits are cleared away so that temples can once more be houses of prayer; churches can be places that worship the God who is the respecter of no one nation or race; and societies can be beloved communities according to the intentions of our sovereign, lovingly persistent God.

When Jesus' story is told in John's gospel, the cleansing of the temple comes early in Jesus' ministry—not near the end as is the case in the other three gospels. Right before he chased out the livestock sellers and moneychangers, Jesus did his first miracle at the wedding of Cana. At that joyous gathering, Jesus quietly turned jars of water into wine—darkening the clear water into the bold red of wedding celebration wine. At the end of Jesus' ministry in an upper room on Passover night, he would invite his disciples to remove their sandals, and he quietly washed their feet. As a servant, he knelt before them and turned the clearness of a bowl of water dark with the dirt and grime washed off their feet. When they objected, Jesus said to the disciples: *If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you.* (John 13:14–15)

The gospel reminds us that to follow Christ means leaving something behind. To follow Christ means saying “No” to things in order to say “Yes” to the Lord. Something must be washed off when we receive baptism waters. Something must be pushed out of the way when we seek a clear path toward God. The weight of the status quo will always try to hold us down instead letting us mount up on wings like eagles. And as the example of Christ reminds us, the flawed things of this world need to be overturned and repudiated because tyranny is always better organized than freedom. Yet God's justice cannot be denied.

Look around this day. Whose voice have you not heard, yet through your privilege you can finally amplify it and take it to heart? Whose extended hand can you take to help them up at last? What fills your spirit with zeal and a prophetic faith this day? Let that be your Lenten discipline as we await the healing light of Easter morning.

Days before his murder, Oscar Romero told a reporter, “Tell the people that if they succeed in killing me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully, they will realize they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish.”

AMEN