

# Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Rev. Earl Grout

The Second Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2010

Acts 11:1-18; Revelations 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

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## The Great Harvest of the Kingdom

The door closes with finality. Judas has gone out, the cross looms, and John writes: glory...glory...glory...glory. Four times.

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life,” wrote poet Mary Oliver. Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande decided to stand with the poor in El Salvador during the violent upheaval and repression in the 1980's. Daily Fr. Rutilio taught, preached and encouraged the poor to stand and defend their right to survive and to live with dignity and hope for their children. His work cost Rutilio his life. He died a death freely accepted and taken up on behalf of love, love for the truth and for his people. Rutilio's death brought about the conversion of his bishop, Oscar Romero. We know his story. The Son of Man has been glorified by giving himself totally.

And God has been glorified in him. It was Jesus's obedience, his loyalty to the Kingdom of God and its vision of justice and mercy that glorified God. Though in the form of God, as Paul writes, “he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2.8). Jesus and Rutilio could have gotten out of town. Romero could have stayed in his cathedral. But they didn't. God has been glorified in the self sacrifice of God's son and those who follow him.

Strange, even bizarre, it is in the eyes of the world that the glory of God should lie in the incarnation and the cross—holiness indwelt in a human being, dying the death of an enemy of the state. The God who made the world is revealed in terms of a self-giving love, in a divine Self that found itself and its glory by giving itself

away, and by continuing to give itself away, as in the fearlessness of that priest and bishop.

And Jesus will be glorified in God. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen,” the angel says in Luke (24.5). Jesus *lives*. He is present, not past. And God has vindicated him. “Easter is not about an afterlife or about happy endings,” says scholar Marcus Borg. “Easter is God's ‘yes’ to Jesus *against* the powers who killed him.” Jesus is Lord, and the lords of this world, the lords of power and wealth, are not. His resurrected life opens the way for the Spirit to create a new human family where repentance and the forgiveness of sins, compassion and mercy, justice and dignity are the order of the day. That's where Rutilio and Romero come in. And so do we.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” He says it three times with a sense of urgency. Time is short. He is on his way. He doesn't want the disciples—or us—to miss the point.

Well, what is the point? First and foremost: don't shut people out, invite them in. Did you wonder at the pairing of today's passages? It sounds like Jesus Meets the Food Channel. But the point of Peter's vision is: don't slam the door on people because of what they eat or don't eat. Have we learned anything? We still do food elitism. A reflection on the Acts passage in *Christian Century* points out, “The terms proliferate: vegetarian and vegan are joined by pescetarian, pollotarian, flexitarian and raw foodist.” As a lover of burgers and desserts, I might be a “gut-bomb-and-fat-pill-tarian.” But

the point as ever is that God rejects our good reasons for refusing someone else's food, because in doing so, we refuse them. It's like this table. This is not an Episcopal table; it's the Lord's table. This is our family. This meal is what we do together here. You should come.

It's not just food, of course. We separate ourselves from each other in myriad ways. You could name a dozen without thinking. Elitism is instinctive. That is why Jesus gives us a new commandment—not a new suggestion. What is required is obedience, not belief. We follow Jesus by loving each other as he loved us. What does that demand of us?

To start with, who is "us"? Our families and those we love? Colleagues, friends, neighbors? Fellow parishioners and believers? The stranger among us? All of them. That means giving up all the ways we separate ourselves from each other.

He means to love selflessly. Jesus touched, healed and then said, "By the way, don't tell anyone about this, OK?" His agenda was love, not himself. How often do we give ourselves away without expecting something back? We've all done it, often in spite of ourselves, by loving someone helpless: an infant or an ageing parent. My recent chaplain's experience at Swedish has taught me this in a different setting—being with people who have nothing to give back but their own suffering. Somehow it's lovely.

He means to love sacrificially. For Jesus, this meant the cross. He didn't want to go there, but he did, for our sake. Parents are pretty good at this kind of love. How far can we take it? Rutilio and Romero took it to their crosses. We hope it doesn't come to that. I am sure those two martyrs hoped it wouldn't. But I think the point is that self sacrifice brings us a very deep peace and joy, even if it demands pain on the way. It might mean staying with someone you love amid suffering that has made life intolerable to both of you. May we love deeply.

He means to love with understanding. Living with his disciples day in and day out, Jesus knew them intimately. He lived with their bad habits, moods, weaknesses. And he loved them. Being in a marriage or committed partnership requires understanding love—clear-eyed, not blind. So does living in a parish. Jesus has a heart big enough to love us as we are, just as he loved the disciples. May we love hugely.

He means to love forgivingly. Obtuse, scheming, vain, insensitive, and at the last, cowardly—such were the less endearing qualities of the disciples. Yet Jesus forgave them. He held nothing against them, nor does he us. All of us are puzzles with pieces that are missing or don't fit. May we love mercifully.

Jesus speaks with urgency. Time is short, I hear him saying, so love one another as I have loved you. Just that way: selfless, sacrificing, accepting and forgiving. It's important, because love is the key to the Kingdom.

In the Kingdom, love is how we know. It's how we know God in creation and in each other. It's how we truly know each other. In our obedience, Jesus' commandment becomes a way of life. Rutilio Grande and Oscar Romero simply couldn't help themselves. Love was their nature. It is ours, too.

It begins with little things in our everyday life, and can lead to great things. Two brothers farmed, one had a large family while the other was single. The married brother told himself, "I have a family to take care of me when I get old, but my brother has no one." So once a week, in the dark of night, he visited his brother's farm and dumped a sack of grain into his brother's granary. The single brother said to himself, "I just have myself to look after, but my brother has a large brood to provide for." So every week, in the wee hours, he added a sack of his grain to his brother's store. One night, as each made his way to the other's farm, hauling his

sack of grain, the two brothers met. The story of their love became legend. After the two brothers died, the town placed a marker on the spot where they had met, for it was holy ground. God was glorified in their lives.

Each little seed of compassion and mercy that we plant throughout our days sprouts and grows, “first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear,” as Jesus says (Mark 4.28). Each little seed of love grows into the great harvest of the Kingdom. Love one another, just as I have loved you. The Kingdom of God is not a spectator sport. As St. Augustine says in this wonderful aphorism: “We without God cannot, and God without us will not.” Glory...glory.... Amen.