



## Love Comes to Town

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008*

Bono, lead singer of the rock band U2, wrote a song entitled “When Love Comes to Town.” It speaks of being lost at sea, being angry, a liar, self-centered--but how all of that changed. Bono sings, “I did what I did before love came to town.”\*

In today’s Gospel reading, love quite literally comes to town. It rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. Hundreds of people are lining the road, full of hope and anticipation--they have heard the rumors of this king. And, though he doesn’t really look all that impressive or regal in person, they hope that he will be the one to change the world, to reverse their fortunes. They see in this strange man what they want to see--someone who will end their suffering. So they scream hosanna and wave palms and proclaim that this wandering rabbi is their king. This story, the Jesus’ story, is starting to get really good-- the crowd is fully behind him. And it looks like Jesus might pull off one of the greatest upsets in history and hand the Romans a stinging defeat--freeing his people from tyranny. But then--well, we know what happens. Instead of triumph this trip to Jerusalem turns into a disaster. The crowds’ view of who this man is changes dramatically; they decide that he is an imposter. He is not really a king at all. He isn’t going to lead an army and kill all their enemies after all. He is, in fact, pretty useless. He refuses to defend himself. He refuses to incite the crowds to violence; heck, he refuses even to speak. And very, very quickly the crowd turns against him and the scene changes into a trial, mocking, whipping, scourging and crucifying. All in the span of a few hours. Jesus, you see, was not at all what he seemed to be. He had this notion that he could change the world. And the religious authorities, the political authorities and some of the common people made him pay dearly--made him pay with his life.

But wait, we may think, Jesus was the Son of God--so for him to die maybe wasn’t as difficult as it would be for a regular person--surely he had some sort of Divine protection plan--something that made his choice, his suffering not so bad as it seemed to be, something that exempts us who are so clearly not Jesus, from ever having to think about walking the same path. Surely God would never ask us to make a choice that dramatic.

On February 23, 1977, the Rev. Oscar Romero was appointed Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador--a country that was torn by a violent struggle between an oppressive government and a people who had allied themselves with the Marxist movement as a means of fighting back. Romero was a darling of the Vatican, opposed to the liberation theology sweeping Latin America--a theology that the Vatican found problematic, a theology that proclaims God preferentially sides with the poor and the weak and desires justice for all people. Priests in El Salvador who were proponents of liberation theology and who had stood with the workers were dismayed by the choice of Romero, but the government of El Salvador was pleased--feeling that in him they had an Archbishop who would not challenge them in any way. And at first it looked like the government was getting exactly what it had hoped for--but then something changed. On March 12--just a few weeks into Romero’s tenure--one of his good friends, Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande, who had been working with the poor, was assassinated. Romero drove out of the capitol to a rural village to view Grande’s body and that of the old man and seven-year-old boy who were killed with him. Standing there, looking at these three bodies, seeing the silent pleas in the eyes of the people standing by, something in Romero changed--as he later said, “When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead I thought ‘if they have killed him for what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.’”

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\*Hewson, Paul (Bono), 1988, “When Love Comes to Town,” from *Rattle and Hum*.

From that moment on Romero became an outspoken activist for the Salvadoran people, an ardent supporter of liberation theology and a major irritant to both the Roman Church and the Salvadoran government. He spoke out against injustice, assassination, poverty and torture--against violence that had reached such a level that 3000 people a month were dying. Not surprisingly, Romero himself, as a threat to the government, began to receive death threats on a regular basis.

On March 24, 1980, Romero was celebrating the Eucharist at a small chapel near the Cathedral in San Salvador. He preached a sermon in which he called on the Salvadoran soldiers, as Christians, to stop carrying out the government's repression and violations of basic human rights. He told the people, "I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, know that I forgive them and that I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people . . . One must not love oneself so much, as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and those that fend off danger will lose their lives." A few moments later, a sharpshooter's bullet felled Romero, who died at the altar.

Romero, you see, did not behave as he was supposed to. He had the notion that he could change the world. And the religious leaders, the political leaders, and some of the common people made him pay dearly--made him pay with his life.

Love is not always easy to recognize--it often shows up in unexpected people and places. And when we do recognize it can be disturbing--unsettling. It looks quietly into our eyes and asks us to see the world differently, to change all our ideas about power, glory and triumph, to change who and how we are in the world, to do things we may not be comfortable with, may not want to do. Our response to this love is sometimes to love back, and sometimes is to retreat in fear--which often leads to retaliation, lashing out. We are afraid of this love that knocks us off balance and if we recognize it at all we want to push it away.

Love came riding into town--looking like a scruffy peasant, riding on the back of a silly donkey, entering Jerusalem at the gate on the other side of town to the one the king or emperor would use. Love came to town in a most unexpected form. Love has since come riding into town in many different and unexpected guises--looking like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero. And each time, love has paid the price, has paid dearly, because each time love has chosen the way of God--the way of faithfulness, steadfastness, the way that puts love and justice above self. And each time that way, a way that forces us to choose whether we will follow the quixotic man riding a donkey through the lowly people's gate, or the fabulously dressed flashy emperor leading a huge army, each time that way confuses us, scares us that we will lose ourselves in following through the lowly gate.

Bono continues in the song "When Love Comes to Town," "I was there when they crucified my Lord, I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword, I threw the dice when they pierced his side, but I've seen love conquer the great divide.<sup>†</sup>" As much as we crucify love, push it away, are scared to let love infuse and inspire us--as much as we punish God, God continues to reach across the great divide and conquer it. That is a story we know as well as the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, as the assassination of Romero. Love continues to stretch out its arms and embrace the world--arms that are sometimes stretched out and nailed to the cross. It continues to open its arms and invite all to come and eat at the Table--the Table where all are fed, are joined to each other and to God in love. The Good News is that love did not just ride into town once and then quit when it wasn't recognized--when all didn't work out as hoped. Love continues, time and time again, to ride into town. Today it gazes into our eyes and asks us which procession we will join. Your answer, my answer is critically important. You might even say that it is an answer that could change the world.

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<sup>†</sup>Hewson (Bono), 1988, "When Love Comes to Town."