

**Preaching in Place: Reflections on the Sermons of Oscar Romero,
Dislocated Pulpits, and the Dangers of an Incarnate Word**

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Abstract: *Preaching becomes true preaching when it is grounded in real place. In real place the pulpit becomes a cross. Among those who have given their voice to preach such a located gospel is Oscar Romero (1917–1980), whose pulpit became a cross when he chose to preach a word not abstracted from his place, but that touched the wounds and sins of his own people. This paper highlights excerpts of Romero’s sermons and commends this preacher as a guide in imagining what “preaching in place” might look like today.*

Dislocated Pulpits

In his 2010 book *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Willie James Jennings describes the unspeakable horrors of racism and the unthinkable devastation that results when Christianity climbs into bed with worldly powers. Jennings details how slavery destroyed—for both the oppressor and the oppressed—the interdependent relationships of individuals and communities with *place*. Of the conquest in Africa, for instance, he writes, “The deepest theological distortion [that took place was] that the earth, the ground, spaces, and places [were] being removed as living organizers of identity and as facilitators of identity.”¹ He traces the disruption between people and place across centuries and continents. Then, after surveying the global wreckage left by imperialism and mapping the historical impoverishment of the Christian imagination in the West, Jennings claims that “Christianity is in need of place to be fully Christian.”² He denies the existence of a *spaceless* or *timeless* Christianity; he suggests that to abstract the Christian faith from historical *place* and *time* is to destroy its integrity—and, in so doing, to inflict harm on self, others, and creation.

Some may disagree countering with the possibilities of universal and eternal truths within the Christian faith, perhaps even invoking Vincent of Lérins, whose canon states that “in the Catholic Church itself, every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” After all, he writes, this is what the word “catholic” means.³ Biblical prooftexts exist: Jesus tells the woman at the well that the day would come when worship would no longer be restricted to a mountain in Samaria or Jerusalem (John 4:21–24)—ostensibly forecasting a future worship that would not depend on place. The writer of Hebrews preaches that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” a timeless Lord who does not change.⁴

Nevertheless, universal and timeless truths of the faith in no way detract from Christianity’s dependence on context. One needs to look no further than Christ himself, who “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). The Christ was no universal human being but Jesus of Nazareth, a male Jew born to poor parents in a remote village in the Middle East two thousand years ago. He was born into a specific community’s history with concrete aspirations. Richard Hays writes, “Jesus locates himself in a particular national history, with all its pain and

¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2010), 39.

² *Ibid.*, 248.

³ Vincent of Lérins, “The Commonitories,” in *Grace and Free Will* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 270.

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

ambiguity, and with its hopes for final vindication by God.”⁵ He was born in utter particularity and died in like manner: “There they crucified him,” John, the Evangelist, writes (John 19:18). *There*—on a hill named Golgotha, between two insurrectionists, by the hands of some Romans and because of many Jews, Jesus died. He was not killed for preaching a timeless message about an otherworldly love, a point similar to the one William Barber II makes about Martin Luther King Jr., in paraphrasing Richard Lischer: “King didn’t get in trouble for preaching love, but for preaching love in all the wrong places—places of power where ruthlessness and greed refused the challenge of truth.”⁶

“Christianity is in need of place to be fully Christian,” Jennings writes, and few in the church know this as well as *preachers*. The preacher does not just ask, “What does God say?” but “What does God say *here, today, to these hearers, through me?*” Fred Craddock explains, “It is only when local soil has been added that the sermon will take root and grow.”⁷ Mary Hulst opines that “to preach in our contexts . . . is to put [our congregants’] names in the Story.”⁸ Similarly, Luke A. Powery insists, “There is no such thing as a ‘universal’ homiletical theology . . . the preached word not only goes somewhere but also comes from somewhere.”⁹

Many preachers, past and present, could be commended to preachers today as guides toward greater contextualized preaching. Few have left as great a legacy of witness to the gospel and prophetic preaching as Oscar Romero (1917–1980), priest and eventual archbishop of El Salvador, who was martyred for his witness to the gospel in his own place and time. In his writing and preaching, Romero pushed the church toward greater valuation of place:

For it is very easy to preach a Gospel that sounds the same here in El Salvador as it does there in Guatemala or in Africa. It is the same Gospel, of course, just as it is the same sun that brightens the whole world. But just as the sunlight is diversified in flowers and fruits according to the needs of the nature that receives its rays, so God’s word has to be incarnated in concrete realities, and that is what makes the church’s preaching difficult. Preaching a Gospel that does not engage with reality creates no problems, and it’s very easy to carry out the preacher’s mission that way. But casting the Gospel’s universal light on our Salvadoran miseries—and also on our Salvadoran joys and successes—that is what is most beautiful about God’s word because that is how we know that Christ is talking to us, our archdiocesan community gathered here to meditate on his divine word.¹⁰

Romero’s preaching ministry came to be defined by such “concrete realities,” namely the wounds and sins, hopes and frustrations of his own people.

⁵ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2016), 139–40.

⁶ William J. Barber II, “Foreword: The Terrible Joy of Dangerous Preaching,” in *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* by Frank A. Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), xiv. See Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.

⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 98.

⁸ Mary S. Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 115.

⁹ Luke A. Powery & Sally A. Brown, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 30.

¹⁰ Oscar Romero, “The Mystery of Salvation in Christ,” 4 June 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol3_91_MysterySalvationChrist.pdf.

Jennings's insight, that Christian imagination in the West has been broken and impoverished by being detached from place, holds implications for Western pulpits, also. Though many preachers express a conviction that preaching must be contextualized (as briefly indicated above), it remains possible that such contextualization manifests in shallow and insufficient ways. Surely many preachers and traditions succeed in contextualization more than others, yet regardless of the degrees to which preachers or preaching traditions succeed or fail in contextualization, Jennings's insight remains relevant and worthy of stress for preaching. In faithfulness to the example of an incarnate Christ, preaching cannot disregard the concrete realities of the world. True preaching can only happen in real place.

This paper applies Jennings's statement (i.e. "Christianity is in need of place to be fully Christian") to preaching, and does so primarily through the exemplary witness of Oscar Romero. This paper addresses the question, In what sense and to what degree have many pulpits in the West become *dis-located*?—unscrewed and unhinged (so to speak) not simply from the boards of the platform on which they are physically fastened, but unscrewed and unhinged from the particular contexts in which they exist. This paper is a call to *re-locate* and *further locate* the pulpit. As a result, it will become evident—as in the example of Christ and also in the example of Romero—that to preach in such a concrete and contextualized way is to invite a cross into one's life. In real place the pulpit becomes a cross.

Oscar Romero

The Preacher's Formation

A prosaic, yet still remarkable, observation to be made about Oscar Romero is that he was not born a preacher of an incarnate, concrete, hyper-contextualized gospel. No one is. In fact, it was not until much later in his life, after becoming archbishop of El Salvador only a few years before his assassination that he seems to have fully embraced such a gospel. He was entering his seventh decade of life, and it was then that his deep inner transformation most fully manifest itself in his preaching and writing. From childhood to adulthood, from beginning minor seminary at age 13 to becoming archbishop at age 59, from his birth in 1917 to his death in 1980, he was on a long journey of understanding the implications and cost of his faith.

Romero was born on August 15, 1917 in Ciudad Barrios in the remote, eastern part of El Salvador, just ten miles from the Honduran border.¹¹ The country became a Spanish colony in 1540 and gained independence in 1821.¹² In area, El Salvador is the smallest country in North America (about the size of the state of New Jersey), but it is very densely populated.¹³ The family Romero was born into was not the poorest of the poor, but at times they struggled to get by.¹⁴ From a young age, Oscar felt called to be a priest,¹⁵ and from the age of 13 until 18 he attended minor seminary in the city of San Miguel.¹⁶

¹¹ Kerry Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2018), 1. Most of the biographical information in this paper is taken from Walters's biography. For another account of Romero's life, considered a standard text, see James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

¹² "El Salvador Country Profile," *BBC*, accessed 5 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19401932>.

¹³ "Central America: El Salvador," *CIA World Fact Book*, accessed 5 May 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/el-salvador/>.

¹⁴ Walters, op.cit., 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6, 13.

During these formative years, Romero witnessed immense suffering among his people. The global depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s impacted his homeland and gave rise to country-wide economic hardship. An even larger economic gap between the haves and the have-nots resulted. At the beginning of the year 1932, the year Oscar turned 15, a peasant rebellion occurred in which some 30,000 people were killed within a month's time. This event came to be known as *La Matanza*, "The Slaughter," and it left a deep wound on the nation.¹⁷ According to Kerry Walters, "In a fundamental way, both the injustice and oppression that led to the rebellion and horrible killing that followed in its wake defined the economic, political, and cultural climate of the El Salvador in which Romero would live and die."¹⁸

In 1937, having completed minor seminary, Romero was awarded a scholarship to study in Rome where he would spend the next six years.¹⁹ There he developed a deep respect and love for Pope Pius XI which he would carry with him for the rest of his life.²⁰ He was also impacted by Ignatian spiritual practices and wrote his dissertation on the Jesuit Luis de la Puente. The experience in Rome made a deep impression on the young man, and he was ordained in 1942 at the age of 24.

Returning to El Salvador in 1944, he became a priest and auxiliary bishop in the section of his country that included his hometown Ciudad Barrios.²¹ He quickly garnered the reputation for being a tireless worker, and he was a beloved preacher.²² He was a perfectionist, which not only placed an almost unbearable weight on his own ministry, but also on his relationships with other priests. Romero was not always liked or understood by his fellow clergymen, but he sought to be a friend to the poor and the rich alike. He took it upon himself to minister to everyone, regardless of their socio-economic condition.²³

His career as priest and bishop is too detailed to rehearse, but what is of interest to this study is that Romero continued to have some reservations about the social movements underway in the area.²⁴ He was regarded by many as a conservative, and even as late as 1976 (just a year before his appointment as archbishop, and four years before his death) he had outspokenly rejected the liberation theology of Jon Sobrino.²⁵ Romero fit neatly into no camp, so much so that members of whichever party (e.g. Marxists on the left, power holders on the right; ecclesial conservatives, liberal theologians) were bewildered, if not put off, by Romero's lack of commitment to a party. Until the end, he seems to have retained his thoughtfulness and nuance.

On his way to his appointment as archbishop of San Salvador in 1977 at the age of 59, Romero underwent several transformative experiences. One of these was the impression left on his thinking by the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II was the council that called the church to

¹⁷ Ibid., 10–11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ "The importance of Romero's formation there cannot be overstated. He fell under the influence of all things Roman—or at least all things Vatican—an attitude traditionally labeled *romanità*. Rome instilled in the young Salvadoran a deep fidelity to the institution and hierarchy of the Church, unwavering devotion to its doctrines and traditions, and a deep appreciation for its spiritual traditions, particularly as expressed by the Jesuits." Ibid., 16.

²⁰ Pius placed special import on social justice. Ibid., 17.

²¹ Ibid., 27.

²² Ibid., 27, 30.

²³ Ibid., 31.

²⁴ "Romero still wasn't ready to acknowledge that El Salvador's woes were the result of systemic inequality and institutional sin rather than the individual actions of rogue guardsmen." Ibid., 64.

²⁵ E. A. Livingstone, "Romero, Oscar Arnulfo," in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., 489 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

return to the gospel²⁶ and tried to bring Catholic teaching “up to date.”²⁷ Sobrino notes that Romero’s ministry was deeply affected by liturgical movements (like Vatican II) which were underway in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁸ In addition to Vatican II, the conference at Medellín in 1968 also deeply shaped Romero, and not just Romero, but the entire Latin American church. This conference (*Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano*, also known as C.E.L.A.M.) was called by Pope Paul VI to apply the teaching of Vatican II to the Latin American context, to its societies, economies, and politics. The conference was a “watershed in the history of Latin American Catholicism,” and called the leaders of the church to stand in solidarity with the poor.²⁹

In addition to these conferences which engendered the revitalization of the Church’s doctrine, there was another major factor that pushed Romero over the edge and into transformation, and that was the continued violence in El Salvador. Kidnappings and killings were happening with increasing frequency. One instance of suffering impacted Romero more than any other: the murder of his dear friend, Father Rutilio Grande. As church historian Justo González tells it, Romero did not have many intimate friends in his life. He was described as an inward person. He was misunderstood by many, even those nearest him. But the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande was one of the rare people with whom Romero became close. Sometime after 1967, the two men met and kindled a friendship. They shared much in common including life experiences, theological convictions, and hopes for the future of the church.³⁰ But on March 12, 1977, following a harsh sermon against the injustice of his country, Father Grande was assassinated. He was shot so many times that one witness said his body looked like it had “disintegrated.”³¹

This event would later be referred to as “Rutilio’s Miracle,” because, when Romero saw the body of his slain friend, he was profoundly reformed.³² It was not that this change had come about all at once but rather that this event was, as Walters puts it, “the final straw in a long process of coming to terms with the time and place in which God had called him to serve.”³³ Romero had just been appointed archbishop of San Salvador a few weeks prior and following the killing, he called for a *misa única*. There, Romero declared to his church that “the one who attacks one of my priests, attacks me.”³⁴ Thus, Romero’s journey from inward priest to outspoken archbishop was complete.

The Preacher’s Sermons

More could be said about Romero’s development into a preacher of a concrete gospel but it is enough to say that by 1977, after nearly six decades of life, years of witnessing economic injustice and country-wide violence, and the killing of his dear friend, this preacher was no

²⁶ Walters, op.cit., 38.

²⁷ Livingstone, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 588.

²⁸ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Our Own Time*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 268. Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric writes, “Anybody reading Romero’s sermons will be quickly struck by how often he cites from the official teachings of the Catholic Church.” Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric, “Microphones of Christ: Lessons from the Pulpit of Oscar Romero,” *Homiletic (Online)*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2017): 6.

²⁹ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2, rev. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 508.

³⁰ Walters, op.cit., 86.

³¹ Ibid., 86.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 88.

³⁴ Ibid., 87.

longer content to preach a gospel that had little to say to his own broken corner of the world. Romero had arrived at the conclusion that unless the gospel becomes incarnate in his place (as it should in every place in which Christians preach) it ceases to be the true gospel. In many places in his homilies, Romero advocates for the preaching of a concrete gospel:

If one desires to preach without any reference to the historical situation in which one lives, then one is not preaching the gospel. Many desire a preaching that is so spiritual that it would allow sinners to remain in their present state, a preaching that would not call people idolaters even though they bow down before the god of money and power. A preaching that does not denounce the sinful realities during the time of reflection on the gospel is not a proclamation of the gospel.³⁵

It is clear here, as in other sermons, that Romero believed that one who fails to address the church's societal or historical situation is not simply preaching poorly but is not preaching at all. Though he acknowledges that the gospel is in one sense unchanging and universal, he also argues that the gospel addresses particular situations:

[Christianity] has to be the leaven of the present time. It must not just point out the sins of the time of Moses and Egypt nor of the time of Christ and Pilate and Herod and the Roman Empire, but the sins of today, here in El Salvador, the ones that we are forced to live among in these actual surroundings. We must be the seed of holiness and unity here amid the dreadful things that are going on among our own people, with whom we are in communion as a Church.³⁶

This is not to say that everything is relative and subject to complete contextualization. The gospel does contain constants but those constants must morph to fit specific places and times. Perhaps nowhere does Romero communicate this more artfully than in his sermon on June 4, 1978 (as previously quoted):

For it is very easy to preach a Gospel that sounds the same here in El Salvador as it does there in Guatemala or in Africa. It is the same Gospel, of course, just as it is the same sun that brightens the whole world. But just as the sunlight is diversified in flowers and fruits according to the needs of the nature that receives its rays, so God's word has to be incarnated in concrete realities, and that is what makes the church's preaching difficult. Preaching a Gospel that does not engage with reality creates no problems, and it's very easy to carry out the preacher's mission that way. But casting the Gospel's universal light on our Salvadoran miseries—and also on our Salvadoran joys and successes—that is what is most beautiful about God's word because that is how we know that Christ is talking to us, our archdiocesan community gathered here to meditate on his divine word.³⁷

Romero articulates here both the challenges and rewards that come with preaching concretely. It is easier, he says, to preach a gospel that is not concrete. It is more difficult to preach the gospel

³⁵ Oscar Romero, "Christ, an Always New Word for the Church," 19 February 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/christ_an_always_new_word_for_church.pdf.

³⁶ Oscar Romero, "The Eucharist: Christ's Presence in History," 17 June 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/eucharist_christs_presence_in_history.pdf.

³⁷ Oscar Romero, "The Mystery of Salvation in Christ," op.cit.

in a way that casts a light on the real world in which people live. Not only is it more challenging to do this intellectually, but it is also more challenging because one runs greater risk of persecution—as his friend Father Grande had and as Romero himself would in short time. This preaching causes problems. But, without running the risks of preaching concretely, one misses out on the true beauty of this gospel.³⁸ The sun by itself may be beautiful enough, but it is the way in which the sun is diversified in the life of particular landscapes that showcase the greatest beauty.

One may wonder what concrete preaching looked like in Romero's practice. In the above excerpts, Romero preached about preaching, saying what good preaching ought to do. But in the normal design and content of his actual sermons, how did Romero follow his own advice? In answering this question, one might make a few summative remarks. First, Romero preached to the poor. This was all but inevitable due to the large percentage of his parishioners who were poor, including many who worked as *campesinos*. But it was also a product of his being shaped theologically by councils like Vatican II and Medellín and the writings that were produced by them. The option for the poor was one such doctrine that was especially emphasized by these late-20th-century councils. The poor had a special place in the church and the church was called to help the poor.³⁹ Romero had immersed himself in these writings, and they shaped how he saw the world around him and his work in that world as a priest. He came to believe that "the Christian who does not want to live this commitment of solidarity with the poor is not worthy to be called Christian."⁴⁰

The poor held a privileged place in the church and this meant, also, that the poor had much to offer the people of God. Thus, Romero not only preached *to* the poor, but *about* them. The poor were exemplars of what it took to enter the kingdom of God. On Christmas Eve 1978, Romero called all of his church to this same poverty: "Only the poor, the hungry, and those who need someone to come to them because they have need of someone, someone who is God, someone who is Emmanuel, God-with-us—only these people are able to celebrate Christmas. Without the spirit of poverty one is unable to be filled with God."⁴¹ The poor were the church's models of what it took to accept the Lord.

Second, Romero preached concretely by preaching against corrupt moral systems. This is seen, for instance, in his practice of beginning his homilies with announcements of the country's

³⁸ By now, it will be clear to the reader that it was not only the sermon that was to be contextualized, but the preacher's life itself. Romero refused to live away from his people in an ivory tower. Rather, he placed his life among the people. "I want to assure you and I ask your prayers to be faithful to the promise that I will not abandon my people but will share with them all the risks that my ministry demands of me." Oscar Romero, "Three Christian Forces for Liberation," 11 November 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_171_ThreeChristianForcesForgeLiberationPeople.pdf.

³⁹ "Since there are so many people prostrate with hunger in the world, this sacred council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the aphorism of the Fathers, 'Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him,' and really to share and employ their earthly goods, according to the ability of each, especially by supporting individuals or peoples with the aid by which they may be able to help and develop themselves." *Gaudium Et Spes*, 69, accessed 4 May 2023, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴⁰ Oscar Romero, "The Poverty of the Beatitudes as the Force for the True Liberation of the People," 17 February 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_186_PovertyBeatitudesForceTrueLiberationPeople.pdf.

⁴¹ Oscar Romero, "Mary, Sign of the Fullness of Time," 24 December 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol4_119_MarySignFullnessTime.pdf.

past week's occurrences.⁴² This news often included stories of violence and corruption. He also called out the powers of society that were antithetical to the gospel in his sermons, and by so doing he was "the voice of the people, the voice of those who are voiceless."⁴³ Romero preached that,

The great conflicts of the church arise because she denounces sin: because she says to the rich, "Do not abuse people by sinning with your money!"; because she says to the powerful, "Do not abuse people with your politics or your weaponry or your power—don't you see that is a sin?"; because she says to the sinners who torture others, "Do not torture; you are sinning; you are doing wrong; you are establishing the reign of hell on earth!"⁴⁴

Romero was not shy about denouncing sin or sinner. Here he calls out the rich, the powerful, and sinners. And he was not afraid to get his hands dirty in the society of his people. "We decry every sin that is night," Romero said, "every evil that is darkness: drunkenness, gluttony, lust, adultery, abortion; we decry everything that is part of the kingdom of iniquity and sin. Let it all disappear from our society."⁴⁵

Third, Romero was true to his own advice to preach concretely in calling the laypersons of El Salvador to work for change in the society. Romero did not believe in a complete and sharp divide between clergy and laypersons, nor, for that matter, between Sunday Mass and Monday morning. All Christians were called to lay their talents and their energies at the feet of Christ in order that the reign of God might be established in El Salvador. The priest was not the only prophet among the people:

Remember I am trying to speak as a member of the people, of a diocese. Although it is true that I am the bishop of the diocese, still I am not the only one with a prophetic mission. It is my whole people, all of my priests, all my religious, the Catholic schools, and all who form the Catholic community. In the name of all of you, beloved lay people who listen to me and reflect with me, I speak about the meaning of our prophetic mission—what we must preach with our witnessing and with our words to the people of El Salvador who so much need this Christian light. You and I are responsible for seeing that Christ's message reaches everyone.⁴⁶

⁴² "The sermons regularly begin with a list of notices, announcements, and comments on the events of the week that the archbishop considers significant. . . . Romero interprets the events of the day before he begins to interpret the text of Scripture." Old, *Our Own Time*, 275.

⁴³ Oscar Romero, "The Divine Saviour is the Solution to All Our Problems," 29 July 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_155_DivineSaviourSolutionAllProblems.pdf.

⁴⁴ Oscar Romero, "Immaculate Conception of Mary," 8 December 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol2_51_ImmaculateConceptionMary.pdf.

⁴⁵ Oscar Romero, "The Church of Hope," 27 November 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol2_47_ChurchOfHope.pdf.

⁴⁶ Oscar Romero, "Christ Gives to Us a Prophetic Mission," 15 July 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_152_ChristHasEntrustedUsWithPropheticMission.pdf.

Romero called every believer a “microphone” of God and urged them to be God’s microphones in their daily lives, at their workplaces, and in their homes.⁴⁷ In this way, God’s word was further incarnated: not only did the preacher preach a word about concrete realities, but the people of God themselves incarnated this word in the society in which they lived. All were called to embody the sermon in El Salvador.⁴⁸ The gospel of Christ Jesus is a lamp in a dark world, and Romero called on the church of El Salvador to be that lamp.⁴⁹

The Preacher’s Cost

The message Romero proclaimed came at the price of his own life. On March 24, 1980, Romero was shot down while celebrating Mass.⁵⁰ But there were other consequences of his preaching that predated (and even postdated) Romero’s martyrdom. “We are a pilgrim church,” Romero said at the funeral mass of his close friend, Father Grande. We are “exposed to misunderstanding and persecution.”⁵¹ Here, Romero articulates two consequences of being a pilgrim church, a church that wanders within this present world: misunderstanding and persecution. Persecution in Romero’s life (which, most of all, includes his death) is somewhat self-evident; misunderstanding, on the other hand, merits a closer look.

Romero’s ministry demonstrates that incarnational preaching invites misunderstanding. This fact contains some irony since Romero was a great rhetorician and a mark of good rhetoric is clarity of communication. This has been the rule for roughly three thousand years. Aristotle instructs that rhetoric aims at lucidity and that any speech that does not communicate clearly fails.⁵² Augustine also teaches that the use of eloquence is not to make what is unfavorable favorable, but to make what is unclear clear.⁵³ Clarity has always been a central aim and hallmark of great speaking.

⁴⁷ “The best microphone of God is Christ, and the best microphone of Christ is the church, and the church is all of you! (Applause) Each one of you, from your own position and your own vocation, should live the faith intensely whether you are married, a religious, a bishop, a priest, a student, an undergrad, a laborer, a worker, a market vendor. In your own particular situation you should feel that you are a true microphone of God our Lord. That way the church will always be preaching, will always be a homily. . . .” Oscar Romero, “The Homily Actualizes God’s Living Word Among Us,” 27 January 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_184_HomilyActualizesGodsLivingWordAmongUs.pdf.

⁴⁸ “The citizen of heaven must first be a good citizen on earth. Those who want to take part in the promises of eternity must collaborate with God in justice and peace and love in this kingdom of earth. And so, sisters and brothers, the struggle of the church is precisely to sow more love, to awaken greater hope, to help sinners repent of their sins and draw closer to God, and to renew us all interiorly.” Oscar Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption: When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2018), 97–98.

⁴⁹ “This ought to be the primary task of the priest, religious women, faithful and all pastoral agents. We are not meddling in politics but enlightening the political situation with the light of the gospel. Our primary task is to light the lamp of the gospel in our communities.” Oscar Romero, “Christ, The True King and Shepherd of All Peoples,” 22 July 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_154_ChristTrueKingShepherdAllPeoples.pdf

⁵⁰ Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero*, 153–56.

⁵¹ Oscar Romero, “The Motivation of Love,” 14 March 1977, accessed 30 October 2023,

http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_1_Motivation_Love.pdf.

⁵² “Let us take it as established that the virtue of a rhetorical use of language is lucidity (for since speech is a sign, it fails to do what it is supposed to do if its meaning is unclear), and that a good rhetorical style is neither humble nor grandiose, but appropriate.” Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 122.

⁵³ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996), 215. “What is the point, after all, of correctness of speech which the hearers are unable to follow and

Yet, what is often minimized is that preaching necessarily entails misunderstanding. To be sure, some misunderstanding can be helped and preachers do well to follow the advice of Aristotle, Augustine, and others in working for clarity. But the fact remains that no one, not even a trained and seasoned speaker, is above being misunderstood. This is not only because of unfortunate static in the communication process but it occurs whenever God's eternal word is made concrete in temporality.

Christ's preaching exemplifies the paradox of brilliant teaching that is met with misunderstanding. Yes, there are plenty of occasions in the Gospels when Christ is enigmatic and purposefully puzzling,⁵⁴ and at times he means to evade understanding.⁵⁵ However, being misunderstood was also his fate and a natural result of a word made flesh. Examples from John's Gospel suffice to make the point. In the wilderness, some of the Jewish people tried to make Jesus king, clearly misunderstanding his ministry (John 6:15). At his triumphal entry, readers are told that "his disciples did not understand these things at first" (John 12:16). The Last Supper is a string of confusions, one after another (John 13:8–9, 29, 37; 14:5, 8).⁵⁶ Time and again Jesus was misunderstood. This misunderstanding was inherent in who he was: the eternal word of God made flesh. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him." (John 1:10).⁵⁷

Romero's preaching was not misunderstood because he was vague or disorganized. On the contrary, his preaching was misunderstood because he was all too clear. His concreteness led to his being misheard.

The whole person must be saved and that includes people in their social relationships so that they will not view some people as more human than others but will consider all people as brothers and sisters and give preference to the weakest and the neediest. This is the integral human salvation that the Church wants to bring about—a difficult mission! Often the Church will be identified with communistic or revolutionary subversives. But the Church is aware of her revolution: the revolution of Jesus Christ's love.⁵⁸

In this homily, Romero reveals his awareness that there were outsiders who misunderstood his church. The word here translated "will be identified" is *catalogar* in Spanish, which may also be translated into English as "catalogued."⁵⁹ This word evokes a helpful image for why the church is misunderstood. A catalogue contains only so many predetermined categories into

understand, seeing that there is absolutely no point in speaking at all, if the people do not understand, whom we are speaking to precisely in order that they may understand?" Ibid., 214.

⁵⁴ One thinks especially of Mark 4:11–12. Jesus said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables, in order that 'they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

⁵⁵ "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Matt. 11:25–26.

⁵⁶ And apparently misunderstanding continued even after his resurrection, because John tells of a rumor that circulated for some time that was built on a misunderstanding about what Jesus said about John (John 21:23).

⁵⁷ Henri Nouwen observes that the incarnation is a prevalent theme in Romero's preaching. One can see why the doctrine would have been so central to this preacher's thinking. Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Foreword," in *The Violence of Love*, Oscar Romero (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), xii.

⁵⁸ Oscar Romero, "True Independence Can Come to Us Only from Christ," 9 September 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_162_TrueIndependenceOnlyFromChrist.pdf.

⁵⁹ Translated thus in Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 164.

which new content must be placed. These systematized groupings are seldom hospitable toward items and experiences that are new or that straddle many categories and neatly fit into none. Hearers cannot but place the preacher's words into the categories available to them; hearers can only bring into the church the categories they have learned from their experience in the world.

Thus, when outsiders heard Romero's preaching about saving whole persons within their social relationships, they were tempted to categorize him and his parishioners as communistic or revolutionary subversives. These categories had been predetermined by the society of which the church was a part (in fact, by other societies outside Central America, also). The society had gotten its foot in the door first, so to speak—or better, it had the ear of the people. This made Romero's task of preaching a concrete, gospel word to his people very difficult. For good or bad, it would be very difficult for outsiders (and insiders, too, for that matter) to hear his message without identifying him with societal movements and happenings. Romero continued to insist that "the work of faith cannot be identified with a specific political task."⁶⁰

That Romero does not fully and neatly fit within categories like "liberation theology" or "Marxism" is evidenced by tracing again his development as a pastor. Early in life he fell under the spell of *romanità*, "a deep fidelity to the institution and hierarchy of the Church, unwavering devotion to its doctrines and traditions, and a deep appreciation for its spiritual traditions."⁶¹ Later in life, in his final letter as archbishop, he "defended the analytic value of Marxist social science methodology while rejecting its materialist ideology," another example of his nuanced understanding.⁶² When Romero spoke out against the government and the elites in power, other bishops accused him of being communist. Then, when he encouraged the *campesinos* not to resort to violence he was accused by leftists of being a "shill for the nation's powermongers."⁶³ Romero's elegy at the funeral of the victims of the Tres Calles massacre of June 1975 angered some who thought his call to nonviolence was an indictment of the dead.⁶⁴ Later, when the government began a campaign of terror, Romero's call to peace was ignored by both the military and the guerillas. To the guerillas' ears, Romero's appeal "sounded like just another pious pie-in-the-sky subterfuge that favored the status quo."⁶⁵

It may be easy to categorize Romero (especially later in life) as belonging to the camp of "liberation theology." Although this is appropriate to some extent, the danger is in cataloging him too completely with this movement and eschewing the nuances in his thinking that are needed to describe him. Thus, rather than buying Marxism wholesale, he continued to call for close examination of its principles,⁶⁶ and in a meeting at the Vatican with Cardinal Agostino Casaroli in 1980, he voiced concerns about the "popular liberation movement falling prey to 'foreign ideologies.'"⁶⁷ Romero maintained his sharp mind, his balance, and his nuanced approach to the end of his life.⁶⁸

His criticism of these social movements is clearly evident throughout his homilies after 1977. For one, Romero saw the problems at work in his society as the product of sin and sin was

⁶⁰ Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 141.

⁶¹ Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero*, 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁸ "Romero was and still is hard to locate on ideological maps." Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric, "Microphones of Christ," 14.

not a problem that anything apart from Christ himself could solve. “There can be no true liberation until people are freed from sin,” Romero said.⁶⁹ Only God could redeem the people and make their society a place of peace. In his final Sunday homily of his life, the day before his death, he acknowledged how often he repeated this very idea, but goes on to argue that the church cannot be content with any solution that leaves out God:

I believe I repeat this idea too often but I do not tire of doing so because we run the great risk of wanting to get out of pressing situations with quick solutions and we forget that quick solutions can patch things up without being real solutions. A genuine solution must fit into God’s definitive plan. Whatever solution we decide on for better land distribution, for better management of money in El Salvador, for a political arrangement suited to the common good of Salvadorans, will have to be sought always in the context of definitive liberation.⁷⁰

Romero resisted parroting the ideologies the world handed to him. Rather, he recognized the right in these movements while at the same time calling them to be more. Put another way, he loved the word “liberation” but only as he was able to define it by the gospel.⁷¹

In conjunction with his emphasis on sin, Romero also placed a great deal of importance on the individual. No doubt he called for structural changes in his society but he recognized that unless citizens were made whole by God, structural changes would constantly be undermined. “Let us not just shout slogans about new structures. New structures will be worthless without new persons to administer and give life to the new structures that the country needs.”⁷² Not only

⁶⁹ Oscar Romero, “Lent as God’s Plan for Transfiguring the Peoples through Christ,” 2 March 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_189_LentGodsPlanTransfiguringPeoplesThroughChrist.pdf.

⁷⁰ Oscar Romero, “The Church Serves Personal, Communal, and Transcendent Liberation,” 23 March 1980, accessed 5 May 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_192_ChurchServesPersonalCommunalTranscendentLiberation.pdf. “The Church tells every person and every organization that pursues a noble or just purpose that they are acting well but that is not enough. They must incorporate this work into the work of Christian redemption. If people do not liberate themselves from sin (Christ came here on earth to break the chains of sin), if people do not better themselves to the point of becoming children of God by grace and holiness, then their liberation is incomplete. If people view liberation in a way that dispenses with Christ and trusts only in the ideologies of the earth, then again their liberation is incomplete. The great service of the Church is to serve people and lead them by the hand toward true redemption, toward their true identity, toward their true destiny, toward their integral human calling.” Oscar Romero, “The Church: A Prophetic, Sacramental Community of Love,” 10 September 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol3_103_ChurchPropheticSacramentalCommunityOfLove.pdf.

⁷¹ “I hope that all the movements active in social matters are aware of this doctrine. If they are, they will avoid failure and the short-sightedness that is unable to see beyond worldly realities and temporal structures. As long as our hearts are not converted, as long as our lives are not based on this doctrine that is enlightened by faith to help us to harmonize our hearts with the heart of God, then everything will be feeble, revolutionary, passing, and violent. None of these things is Christian. What gives true life is the social doctrine that the church proposes to people. How enlightened the world would be if all of us took the social doctrine of the church as the basis of our social action, our existence, and our concrete commitments in political and economic affairs!” Oscar Romero, “The Motivation of Love,” 14 March 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_1_Motivation_Love.pdf.

⁷² Oscar Romero, “The Poverty of the Beatitudes as the Force for the True Liberation of the People,” 17 February 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_186_PovertyBeatitudesForceTrueLiberationPeople.pdf.

do new structures without new people run the risk of collapse, but new structures do not ultimately benefit the people. “The church seeks the conversion of every heart because there would be no sense in an economic liberation in which the poor possessed houses and wealth but were all sinners. What good is a heart estranged from God?”⁷³ A temptation of liberation theology is developing an over-realized eschatology, to abandon the hope of resurrection for hope in an improved life here and now. It is clear that Romero never lost sight of the Christian’s ultimate hope: “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matt. 16:26).

Preaching in Place

On Sunday October 2, 1977, Oscar Romero was concluding his homily when he remarked that he was nothing more than “God’s humble echo in this people,” *el humilde resonar de Dios en este pueblo*.⁷⁴ This metaphor offers a fitting summary to this section in three ways. First, Romero stated that he was *God’s* echo, indicating that the word he spoke (not to mention his very life as a preacher) had its origins in God. Second (though perhaps to extend the metaphor beyond Romero’s original meaning), an echo is *sound*, and sound is a physical and temporal phenomenon. Sound cannot occur in a vacuum. Echoes depend on the material world, and without matter there can be no sound. Sound travels through things like wires and water; that is, it depends on a medium. The application of this to preaching is readily available: preaching does not take place in a cultural or societal vacuum; indeed it cannot. What Romero demonstrates is that the gospel must become incarnate just as Christ had to become incarnate.

Third, to expand on the second point, sound is a *disturbance*. Sound is little more than a disturbance of what is already present; it is a disturbance of matter like vocal cords and air. No word that has its source in God and that passes through space and time, the here and the now, can ever do so without disruption. Preaching, like an echo, disturbs what is in place. It disturbs a complacent church and it disrupts corrupt systems. Romero gives words to this, also: “A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that?”⁷⁵

In the same year that he was murdered, Romero would say while preaching that “Christ is the homily”;⁷⁶ that is, the preacher communicates Christ and Christ communicates God. This is true or preaching is for naught. Nothing less than the second person of the Trinity is communicated to the church in the preaching of the word. This word is made incarnate in the

⁷³ Oscar Romero, “The Church of Integral Development,” 9 October 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_37_ChurchIntegralDevelopment.pdf.

⁷⁴ Oscar Romero, “The Church, a Community of Faith,” 2 October 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_36_ChurchCommunityOfFaith.pdf; Oscar Romero, “La Iglesia, Comunidad de Fe,” 2 October 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/1977%2010%2002%20La%20Iglesia%2C%20comunidad%20de%20fe.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Romero, *Violence of Love*, 44.

⁷⁶ Oscar Romero, “The Homily Actualizes God’s Living Word Among Us,” 27 January 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_184_HomilyActualizesGodsLivingWordAmongUs.pdf.

event of proclamation and in the lives of the hearers and it does not leave things the same. It disrupts hearts, lives, systems—yes, even preachers themselves.

When Christ came into the world as the incarnate word some two thousand years ago, a great disturbance was made. Scripture and Christian history tell of individuals, communities, and countries that have been transformed as a result. Christ's coming in the first century disrupted the way things were, and the ripples of that disruption have lapped onto the shores of the present time. If it is the same disruptive person of Christ who comes through the preacher's words to the people of God today, then how could disruption not result?

To summarize some of the principle observations from the preaching of Romero, we have said that he developed into, that is, *he was not born as*, a preacher of a concrete gospel. He grew into this sort of person through life experiences and through exposure to the theology of the Catholic Church. In El Salvador in the latter part of the twentieth century, Romero preached concretely by (1) preaching to the poor, (2) confronting morally corrupt systems, and (3) inviting his parishioners to incarnate the gospel in their lives. Preaching this gospel led to persecution (foremost, his own death in 1980), but also misunderstanding. His preaching sought an appropriate, divine disruption of all that was wrong in his world.

Guidance for Contextualized Preaching

Most preachers preach standing in one place, in or behind a pulpit or perhaps moving within some small, circumscribed area such as a stage. Most preaching is done by located, congregational preachers who preach in the same place to the same people week after week, year after year. How is it then—with the preacher's feet and life so grounded—that preachers could fail to adequately contextualize their sermons?

Charles Campbell has written of the “double bind” of preaching. Others need to have their stories told by those with a voice so that those who do not know them can hear them. Yet, he writes, “It is very dangerous, even inappropriate, to tell another person's story.”⁷⁷ People should be able to tell their own stories, not to have them told by someone else. To tell or not to tell? This is the double bind with which preachers wrestle. In fact, this is the double bind of the present study, wherein I have chosen to tell. The aim of this study has been to highlight the beautiful witness of Romero's life and preaching by sharing his story but also to explore ways to apply his story to the American pulpit today. How might we do this?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor offers helpful language of how we might re-contextualize the already-contextualized example of one like Romero when Taylor insists that each Christian has her or his own *itinerary*. This is one's “existence embedded in a historic order, with its good and bad, in and out of which [one] must move toward God's order.”⁷⁸ Whether it be Charles Péguy or Gerard Manley Hopkins (two of Taylor's examples), or whether it be the Apostle Peter or Oscar Romero, every person has their own itinerary. None has the whole picture; but each works piecemeal in her or his own corner toward God. In seeking and understanding our own itinerary, we do not seek to move *backwards* to, for example, the first century church which we read about in Luke's book of Acts. Neither do we mimic exactly what one like Romero did in his corner of the world, in his time. Taylor writes:

⁷⁷ Charles L. Campbell, *The Scandal of the Gospel: Preaching and the Grotesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 32.

⁷⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard, 2007), 754.

The goal in this case is not to return to an earlier formula, inspiring as many of these will undoubtedly be; there will always be an element of imitation of earlier models, but inevitably and rightly, Christian life today will look for and discover new ways of moving beyond the present orders to God. One could say that we look for new and unprecedented itineraries. Understanding our time in Christian terms is partly to discern these new paths, opened by pioneers who have discovered a way through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, its thickets and trackless wastes, to God.⁷⁹

Taylor reminds the church and its preachers that faithfulness in *our place* will always have a certain quality of unprecedentedness about it.

How then does one apply Romero's example to preaching in America today? To begin, preachers must learn to take their *places* more seriously. Trygve Johnson writes, "To take preaching seriously, we have to take its context equally as seriously."⁸⁰ Sally Brown reminds us that "the everyday spaces where our congregants conduct their daily lives are quite socially and religiously complex."⁸¹ There is no "ordinary" place, no "neutral" sphere wherein the gospel enters as onto a *carte blanche*. As various preachers have noted, the gospel is both at home in every culture and alien to that culture. For a primer toward this sort of cultural engagement for preachers, one may consider Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's classic homiletical text wherein she invites preachers to consider themselves as local missionaries and ethnographers of their people. Tisdale calls for a manner of preaching

which not only gives serious attention to the interpretation of biblical texts, but which gives equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts; preaching which not only aims toward greater "faithfulness" to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but which also aims toward greater "fittingness" (in content, form, and style) for a particular congregational gathering of hearers.⁸²

In light of Romero's example, one question preachers might ask is, *What are the false gods that compete for my parishioners' worship?* Homiletician Jared E. Alcántara defines context for preaching as "a community shaped by local and global identity markers, experiences, expectations, and allegiances."⁸³ Some of these "allegiances" will certainly compete with—if not entirely block—fidelity to Christ. The false gods in Romero's context could be named *materialism* or *power* which led to landowners and government officials oppressing their neighbors. One imagines what these gods are for an American church.

If each place has its own "itinerary" (as Taylor claims) and if the work of the local preacher really is unduplicable (as Tisdale suggests), then it is hardly appropriate for this paper to announce the gods which each and any people in every place are tempted to worship. And, as helpful as it may be to encourage preachers to "preach dangerous sermons," as homiletician

⁷⁹ Ibid., 755.

⁸⁰ Trygve D. Johnson, "Preaching in Context," in *What is Jesus Doing: God's Activity in the Life of the Church*, ed. Edwin Chr. van Driel (Minneapolis: InterVarsity, 2020), 294.

⁸¹ Sally A. Brown, *Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 7.

⁸² Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 32–33.

⁸³ Jared E. Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 78.

Frank Thomas has done, inviting preachers to develop a greater “moral imagination,”⁸⁴ it is important to note that there is no such thing as *a universally dangerous sermon*. What one preacher calls “dangerous” may actually be the safest thing to preach in another context.

Nevertheless, certain false allegiances and gods do come to mind in America. Some of these operate deep beneath the surface of conscious awareness; for instance, the unholy *individuality* that pervades the practices of the church. Stanley Hauerwas calls for the advent of something like an anti-Luther, that is, someone who will come *take the Bible* out of the hands of individuals, undoing the Reformer’s work that began some 500 years ago.⁸⁵ As shocking as this sounds, perhaps it is in some part necessary since the Bible in much of America is no longer the possession of the *church* (i.e. some historic community), but the possession of the *citizen*, “who has every right to determine [the Bible’s] meaning.”⁸⁶ Too often this “meaning” becomes the self-serving possession of the private life and private interests, rather than being a meaning—better, a *purpose*—for the world.

Other examples beyond extreme individualism come to mind. Walter Brueggemann claims that America’s god is “military consumerism.”⁸⁷ This dominant narrative in which American Christians live, “characterized as ‘therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism’—is committed to the notion of *self-invention* in the pursuit of *self-sufficiency* . . .” which “enjoins to *competitive productivity*” and gives way to “*US exceptionalism* that gives warrant to the usurpatious pursuit of commodities in the name of freedom, at the expense of the neighbor.”⁸⁸ In these ways and more, Christianity in America has often displayed a bankrupt moral imagination. Wrapped in the world’s linens of power, consumerism, and exceptionalism, the church has often failed to see place and people the way Christ sees them, in the light of the gospel.

Conclusion

To preach, preachers must preach in place. That is, preachers must see their corner of the world in light of the gospel and speak as members of that corner to that corner.⁸⁹ This allows the preacher to affirm the culture and the people in many ways, but also necessitates confronting false allegiances. It will take the preacher as local ethnographer to tell what these allegiances may be. Nevertheless, one cannot but be moved to confront local wounds and local sins as one recalls the preacher Romero’s words:

A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does

⁸⁴ Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

⁸⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15ff.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

⁸⁹ Postcolonial studies can aid the preacher here. Pui-lan Kwok notes that postcolonial preaching is “a locally rooted and globally conscious performance that seeks to create a Third Space so that the faith community can imagine new ways of being in the world and encountering God’s salvific action for the oppressed and marginalized.” Pui-lan Kwok, “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts,” *Homiletic* 40 (2015), 10. For more on postcolonial preaching, see Elizabeth J. A. Siwo-Okundi, “Preaching in the Postcolonial Theological Family,” in *Preaching the Manifold Grace of God, Volume 2: Theologies of Preaching in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 258–73.

not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?⁹⁰

A final word may be offered. Today, many homileticians and preachers bemoan the place of preaching in the academy and the church. In many seminaries, only one course in preaching is required for even the longest master's degree. In many churches, preaching fares little better. Some parishioners may imagine that "anyone can preach," there is not all that much to it, or that it is the preacher's job merely to be mildly entertaining and inspirational. The place of preaching in the academy is troubling; the estimation of preaching in many churches is troubling. But perhaps this situation has come about in part because preaching has too often lost its place. That is to say, perhaps preaching is in danger of losing its own way by neglecting its *place*, namely, the specific contexts in which it is performed. Perhaps the way forward for preaching will not be found merely by reflecting more internally on the practice of preaching, but by reflecting more externally on the places in which it occurs.

⁹⁰ Oscar Romero, "The Good Shepherd," 16 April 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol2_82_TheGoodShepherd.pdf.