

Growing in the Fruit of the Spirit  
Tending the Wild Garden  
Tending the Shoots of Love  
Trevor Scott Barton, September 15, 2024

Announcements:

#1 - Please plan on staying for lunch in the fellowship hall after the service so you can share a meal and make a friend with one of your TMC neighbors. That's what it's all about, isn't it?

#2 - Please plan on signing a petition at one of the tables around the sanctuary after the service to join South Carolinians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty in asking for clemency for Freddie Khalil Owens who is scheduled to be executed on Friday Evening September 20th. You are welcome to join us for a vigil to pray for Khalil and an end to capital punishment on Friday evening at TMC at 5:30 PM.

#3 - Please be on the lookout for information about a class at the OLLI program at Furman University that will tell the stories of the people on the beautiful mural on the back of our building that was commissioned by the Greenville Homeless Alliance and created by the amazing Ninja Picasso. "It is love, then, that you should strive for." - I Corinthians 14:1 (GNB)  
"God is love." - I John 4:16 (GNB)

### 1. Love of God and the Weed of Violence

Oscar Romero is one of my heroes.

His life and work influenced me to become who I was: an inner-city youth and children's minister at a large housing project, a pastor and director of a rural mission, a missionary in Mali, a stay at home dad/student, a public school teacher - and who I am now: the associate pastor at Triune Mercy Center and a street writer here in Greenville.

I think of him each morning as I swing my legs off my bed and touch the floor barefooted, ready to make my way up and out of my house to the corner of Rutherford Road and Stone Avenue in downtown Greenville.

And I think of him each evening as I sit by candlelight in front of an olive wood carving of St. Francis at my writing desk where I try to put the stories into words that I've seen and heard as I've looked closely and listened carefully to life around me.

Romero helps me see and hear the world, walk in it with tired, dusty feet and touch it with tender, calloused hands.

Oscar Romero was the Archbishop of San Salvador from 1977-1980. It was a terrible time because of a civil war that was scorching the beautiful Salvadoran earth and killing the beautiful Salvadoran people.

At first, he did as most all prelates in El Salvador had done. He made a preferential option for the rich and the powerful, for the oligarchs and the army elites.

As he began to know the lives of the poor and the priests and nuns who served them, he did an astonishing thing. He made a preferential option for the poor and used his power and position as an archbishop to accompany them and become their voices against injustice.

Because of this choice, a right wing assassin shot and killed him as he was celebrating mass at a small chapel beside his sparse room at Hospital de la Divine Providence. He had just finished his sermon and taken a few steps to stand at the center of the altar to begin the mass.

A single bullet struck him in the heart.

He was assassinated because he stood by the poor people in his country and gave witness to their humanity.

In this beautiful way, he loved God by loving the people, by loving the poor and most forgotten people of his land.

A compilation of his sermons and writings is found in the book *The Violence of Love*,

This title seems strange, doesn't it? How can violence and love go together? It's counterintuitive at best and foolishness at worst.

But remember, in God's beloved community the foolishness of God is wiser than people's wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than people's strength.

Romero knew in the deepest parts of his heart that the violent civil war that was killing his people and destroying his country could only be confronted and overcome by the violence of love.

Love is the only power that can come hand to hand and face to face with violence and overcome it by converting violent people into people of goodwill and peace. It is the only power that can turn an enemy into a friend. It is the only power that can transform brute force into humble service.

In a radio address on March 14, 1977, Romero said, "We need to organize life according to the heart of God." When I first read these words I was thunderstruck. Wow.

They are challenging words. How in the world can we organize life according to the heart of God?

If you'll allow me to celebrate Easter in September, I think I can answer this question.

Remember, in the story of John's gospel, as Mary Magdalene stood at the tomb before sunrise, she saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know that it was Jesus. She supposed Jesus to be the gardener.

Here is the answer to our question. To organize life according to the heart of God is to look for God in the people and places where we least expect to find God.

As we strive for love in this way, we often bump into God and realize that God is in the undocumented immigrant who landscapes yards in our neighborhoods.

As we strive for love in this way, we often bump into God in the mother and child waiting in the migrant camp in Mexico along the border between Matamoros and Brownsville, Texas.

As we strive for love in this way, we often bump into God in the innocent Black man on death row being crushed by an unequal legal system.

As we strive for love in this way, we often bump into God in the traumatized child with many, many Adverse Childhood Experiences that lead to misbehavior and heartache.

As we strive for love in this way, we often bump into God on Fox News in the story about the trans kid who has no access to health care or a welcoming and affirming place to be who God made them to be.

As we strive for love, we find love in these people and in these places. We find God. And when we find God, we stand with God there among those neighbors in those neighborhoods and remind the world, "These are our brothers and sisters, our siblings, Jesus walking on the earth with bare feet and an open heart looking for someone, anyone, to say, "We strove for love. We found it. We found God. For God is love."

Strive for love, my friends, in the lives of the poor, in the mourners, in the meek, in the hungry and thirsty for justice, in the merciful, in the pure in heart, in the peacemaker, in the persecuted and discover God.

Romero's Glasses

Faith

Hope

People

A hero

Oscar Romero

Protecting poor, oppressed people

From unimaginable hatred and violence

Dying but not killing, denying guns their power, risking the violence of love

Conserving tradition at first for the greatest, seeing through your glasses at last for the least, feeling the hunger of campesinos, knowing poverty  
Holding the tears of the disappeared, calling all to view the body of a slain priest  
Building up humanity, tearing down injustice  
“In the name of God stop killing...”  
Crucifixion, death  
Life again  
People  
Love  
Peace  
Liberating  
Option for the poor  
Voice of the voiceless  
Eternal life

## 2. Love of Neighbor and the Weed of Injustice

Brother Juniper was a friend of St. Francis'. He lived in the hills of Assisi with Father Francis and seven other brothers. He was the most generous of the brothers but sometimes he took things too far. He'd been known to give away the robe off his back - even if he wasn't wearing anything underneath! Once, Father Francis asked Brother Juniper to look after the church, and the other brothers were very worried about what they'd find when they returned. But with his kind and simple ways, Brother Juniper reminded them all what it meant to truly look after a church.

- Brother Juniper gave away the golden candlesticks so the shoemaker could buy glasses and be able to do his job
- Brother Juniper gave the golden chalice to a poor woman with 8 children and a sick husband so she could take care of them
- Brother Juniper gave the altar cloth to a baker to cover his basket of bread and keep it warm
- Brother Juniper gave the vestments to a raggedy young artist
- Brother Juniper gave the door of the church to a family whose house had been wrecked by a storm

BY EVENING, THERE WERE NO WALLS, NO WINDOWS, AND NO DOORS. THERE WAS NOTHING EXCEPT BROTHER JUNIPER AND HIS BROOM.

- Brother Juniper gave the broom to a cleaning lady who had no broom to do her work.
- Brother Juniper gave the cleaning lady his robe because she was cold and shivering

When the other brothers came home, they found Brother Juniper standing naked in an empty hole.

“WHERE IS THE CHURCH?” they cried..

Brother Juniper had given the church bell to a teacher who wanted to start a school for poor children.

He climbed on a rock and shouted, “Ding ding! Ding ding!”

All the brothers trudged to him, stood around him, and looked at the empty space where the church used to be with long faces.

Then, over the hill to the place where the church building had been came...

- An old man with new spectacles
- A woman with 8 smiling children
- A baker with a basket of warm, fresh bread
- A raggedy artist dressed in nice new clothes
- A teacher with a group of schoolchildren and their parents and their grandparents

The huge crowd said, “We just came to say thank you.”

“Look brothers at the fine church Brother Juniper built,” said St. Francis.”I wish I had a forest of these Junipers.”

Strive for love. Build the church as Brother Juniper did. People will come to be a part of a church like that.

Life giving

Others

Valorous

Echo

### 3. Love of Self and the Weed of Self-Hate

Bryan Stevenson is one of the most brilliant and influential lawyers of our time. His book, *Just Mercy*, is an unforgettable true story about the redeeming potential of mercy. He was a gifted young attorney when he founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to defending the poor, the wrongly condemned, and those trapped in the furthest reaches of our criminal justice system. One of his first cases was that of Walter McMillan, a young man sentenced to die for a notorious murder he didn't commit. The case drew Stevenson into a tangle of conspiracy, political

machination, and legal brinkmanship - and transformed his understanding of mercy and justice forever.

Here is the first conversation he had with a person on death row when he was a law student.

"I'm Henry," he said.

"I'm very sorry" were the first words I blurted out. Despite all my preparations and rehearsed remarks, I couldn't stop myself from apologizing repeatedly.

"I'm really sorry, I'm really sorry, uh, okay. I don't really know, uh, I'm just a law student, I'm not a real lawyer...I'm so sorry I can't tell you very much, but I don't know very much."

The man looked at me worriedly. "Is everything alright with my case?"

"Oh, yes, sir. The lawyers at SPDC sent me down to tell you that they don't have a lawyer yet...I mean, we don't have a lawyer for you yet, but you're not at risk of execution anytime in the next year...We're working on finding you a lawyer, a real lawyer, and we hope the lawyer will be down to see you in the next few months. I'm just a law student. I'm really happy to help. I mean, if there's something I can do."

The man interrupted my chatter by quickly grabbing my hands.

"I'm not going to have an execution date anytime in the next year?"

"No sir. They said it would be at least a year before you get an execution date." Those words didn't seem very comforting to me. But Henry just squeezed my hands tighter and tighter.

"You're the first person I've met in over two years after coming to death row who is not another death row prisoner or a death row guard. I'm so glad you're here, and I'm so glad to get this news." He exhaled loudly and seemed to relax.

"I've been talking to my wife on the phone, but I haven't wanted her to come and visit me or bring the kids because I was always afraid they'd show up and I'd have an execution date. I just don't want them here like that. Now I'm going to tell them they can come and visit. Thank you!"

If Bryan Stevenson hadn't loved himself, if he had quit his work at that moment, there would be innocent people executed who would never be able to bring beautiful life and work into the world again.

Strive for love. Be you. If you are. God's beloved community will expand a little bit farther in the world.

Life

Openhearted

Veritas

Empathetic with yourself