

A Resurrection in Our Time

**A sermon preached by Charlie Clements, UUSC President
On December 6, 2009**

Good morning. Thank you, Ron, for the kind introduction and the invitation to be here this morning. It is always a pleasure to return to Albuquerque, where I lived as a child. I also lived in Santa Fe for ten years before taking the job as president and CEO of the Service Committee. There are times such as during that first winter, when in February the thermometer never got above 20 degrees, that I looked back on that decision to leave the Southwest as “temporary insanity.”

That winter my then seven- and five-year-old son and daughter pulled me aside for a parental conference to remind them of why we had moved someplace where it hurt your face when you went outside. I explained to them that we were part of an ancient prophecy and that locals believed that hell had to freeze over before the Red Sox could win the World Series. The Sox came through that year, and my credibility was restored . . . but it only lasted until the next winter. They were quite envious when they knew I would be eating green chile this weekend! Last time I was in town I went to lunch with Liz McMaster, David Colton, and a few others from First Unitarian and asked the waitress if I couldn't take that side of green chile in a plastic container. At the airport they decided it was more than four ounces and looked like a gel, so it was confiscated. Frankly, I think it was a racket, so the TSA guys and gals could have green chile snacks during their shift.

Today we have to search hard for good news among all the bad news about Iraq, Afghanistan, or Iran, or among the shouting that health care reform is a Nazi or communist conspiracy, but I assure you there are a lot of good things happening in this country and, indeed, the world.

And this morning I want to talk about one of them, a small headline about good news that you may have missed amidst the larger noisier ones. To make complete sense of this headline, to fully appreciate it, I have to take us back to 1977 before the civil war in El Salvador had started.

The civil war there, which lasted from 1980 until 1992, claimed more than 75,000 lives, most of them civilian, the vast majority of them according to a United Nations Truth Commission killed by the military or death squads.

Seventy-five thousand lives lost over a dozen years seems comparable in some ways to the losses of the U.S. over fifteen years in Vietnam, where 58,000 Americans died. All wars are tragedies—beyond imagination unless you have experienced them—but these two even more so perhaps because I'm not sure the reasons for which they were waged made any sense. I experienced both of them, as an Air Force pilot in Vietnam and as a civilian physician in El Salvador, and they are both powerful influences on who I am today.

Today Vietnam has most-favored nation trading status with the United States. And in El Salvador the FMLN political party, which represents the guerrillas whom the United States spent \$5 billion dollars to defeat, recently won the presidency. Our secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, represented the U.S. at the inauguration of Mauricio Funes.

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I, too, was a special guest at his inauguration, both because of my role in the Salvadoran civil war as a physician and, more important, because of UUSC's role in that civil war. This morning I want to share some of that story with you and on behalf of many Salvadorans thank you for your roles in it, contributions perhaps you weren't even aware of or have long ago forgotten.

UUSC was involved in El Salvador at the very beginning of the civil war, before the armed conflict had actually started. On February 28 of 1977 several hundred peaceful protestors had gathered in the Plaza Libertad in downtown San Salvador to protest an election blatantly stolen by a general. A military cordon quickly surrounded the demonstrators and funneled them into the only exit, where they were massacred, where the victims' bodies were quickly carted away at night and their blood washed from the streets with fire hoses to cover up the atrocity. The U.S. media barely took notice, but a small human rights organization based in Boston did. UUSC's executive director, Dick Scobie, and its director of human rights education, John McAward, traveled to San Salvador to investigate. The two UUSC staff met with the newly appointed Archbishop Oscar Romero, who had been in office less than a week. When they asked him how could their organization be of assistance, he asked them to bring influential Americans to El Salvador so they could understand with their own eyes and ears what U.S. tax dollars were abetting: a powerful military that was killing anyone who attempted to bring about social change—school teachers, doctors, community organizers, leaders of cooperatives, and even priests.

Less than a year later UUSC would lead its first congressional fact-finding mission to El Salvador led by Robert Drinan, who was both member of the House of Representatives and a Jesuit priest. Drinan would become a vocal critic of U.S. policy in El Salvador until he was ordered by Pope John Paul II to get out of politics and leave Congress in 1980. Oscar Romero, who had been a priest for the wealthy before becoming archbishop, became the inspiring voice for the downtrodden, and his homilies were listened to on the radio in every corner of the country until he was murdered while saying Mass.

In his next to the last homily, Romero said, "If I am killed, I shall arise in the Salvadoran people."

But it was his last homily that many believe cost him his life when he said:

Brothers, you came from our own people. You are killing your own brothers. Any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God, which says, "Thou shalt not kill." No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law. It is high time you obeyed your consciences rather than sinful orders. The church cannot remain silent before such an abomination. . . . In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you: stop the repression.

Government snipers firing on his funeral procession was considered by many the opening salvo of the brutal civil war that would last until 1992.

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I want to briefly revisit those casualty figures for El Salvador that I mentioned earlier. They will perhaps give you some context for some of Romero's words in his last homilies. At the time of his assassination, 1980, *Tutela Legal*, the human rights office of the Archdiocese was reporting an average of a thousand Salvadorans being brutally murdered by government-sponsored death squads or being disappeared only to have their mutilated bodies dumped in public places to send a message of fear to their friends or families. Without context a thousand is neither a large nor necessarily a small number, but El Salvador at that time had a population of about five million people compared to 250 million Americans.

So to understand the magnitude of 1,000 deaths in comparison to the American population, you have to multiply by fifty. A thousand deaths a month there would be the equivalent of 50,000 deaths a month—what we lost in all of Vietnam, they were losing monthly not in combat, but in the targeted abduction and destruction of leadership of cooperatives, of professionals such as lawyers who dared defend anyone, of spiritual leaders who spoke out against injustice, of school teachers who were declared an enemy of the state because their union called for a strike to better classroom conditions, of health care workers because they were where people turned when they were wounded or tortured.

By war's end UUSC would have led seventeen fact-finding missions, taking many representatives and some senators to the region to meet with people on all sides of the conflict, so they could take their own measure of what role the U.S. was playing.

For a brief year during the early part of the civil war, I would serve as a volunteer physician in a rural area about twenty-five miles from San Salvador. On a clear day I could see the hotel where U.S. journalists stayed, but none came to the slopes of the volcano where I worked, which was called Guazapa. During that year I was in Guazapa, it became a free-fire zone, meaning it was strafed, rocketed, or bombed daily by the Salvadoran air force in U.S.-supplied aircraft.

Over the next decade the U.S. invested more than \$5 billion to defeat the ragtag guerilla army known as the FMLN to no avail, and finally when it almost toppled the government, the U.S. finally permitted a negotiated settlement. Midway through the civil war, I was hired by UUSC as director of human rights education and began leading congressional delegations to the region.

Because of the role I had played as a physician, but, more important, because of the role UUSC had played, I was a special guest at the signing of the Peace Accords in Mexico City in 1992. When from about twenty feet away, I saw the pens of the guerrilla *commandantes* and military generals touch the paper, I was overwhelmed with emotion, because I understood the horrors too well that were about to end.

This church, many of you, and lots of people in Albuquerque as well as throughout New Mexico played important roles in helping end that war and in rebuilding lives and communities in El Salvador. Some churches declared themselves as sanctuaries and defied the U.S. government by harboring refugees. I know the corridor from here to the border was one of the routes of the underground railway that clandestinely helped other refugees get to Canada. You declared sister city relationships with rural towns that bore much of the brunt of the military repression. You supported medical missions to El Salvador to assist with refugees and clinics. You accompanied Salvadorans through Witness for Peace or when they left refugee camps to resettle

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communities that the military did not want repopulated. You demonstrated against U.S. policy in El Salvador, you stood in silent vigils, you made calls, you wrote letters, and you visited your members of Congress and senators, urging them to suspend military aid. You supported UUSC with your individual memberships, with Guest at Your Table, and with special collections. You supported organizations like CISPES, Medical Aid for El Salvador, or the Salvadoran Medical Relief Fund, which I founded. You prayed and acted as peacemakers even when it seemed improbable that peace could ever come to the country known as “the Savior” in Spanish.

One story that could never be told in the war years was how we helped bring a number of guerrilla leaders to Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a week to be tutored in the basics of conflict negotiation by Roger Fisher at Harvard, the author of *Getting to Yes*. They could only enter the U.S. with assumed names, because at the time the State Department was calling them “terrorists.” But that was before 9/11, so security was lax and they came as high-end tourists with forged passports. A few months later, Fisher would get a call from the Salvadoran ambassador to the United Nations. “Roger, our government doesn’t know much about negotiations. I took your short course in January and was very impressed. Would you come down here to coach us in the basics of negotiations?” Of course, he never told either party who his other client was!

The FMLN party was formed under the Peace Accords of 1992 to represent the guerrillas and their civilian supporters. With the help of the United Nations and to a more limited degree the United States, the struggle, which was always about poverty and privilege, was transformed into a political conflict. In the third post-war election in 2000, the FMLN captured a plurality of the National Assembly—that is, more seats than any other party—but it took them until 2009 to capture the presidency.

I was on a train returning to Boston in March of this year when I heard Mauricio Funes’s speech to his supporters as the vote count was marginally declared in his favor. As he said, “I will commit my government to ‘preferential option for the poor’ of Archbishop Romero,” it gave me a chill. This was what the civil war was about—someone in El Salvador being able to champion the plight of the poor without losing their life and without their supporters fearing for their lives if they publicly campaigned for them.

Theodore Parker first told us, Martin Luther King Jr. made it famous, and Barack Obama reminded us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” And, indeed, it has in El Salvador more than thirty-two years after the stolen election that marked the beginning of UUSC’s involvement there.

Carl Jung once said:

The great events of world history are, at bottom, profoundly unimportant. In the last analysis, the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations first take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world, ultimately spring as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals. In our most private and most subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our age, and its sufferers, but also its makers.

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Yes, the courageous, hard-working, and generous Salvadorans carried the baton across the finish line and they were primarily its sufferers, but many of you helped in that gigantic summation as makers of history in your many acts of solidarity, in your acts of protest, and in your financial support through this church or as individuals. You did help create the conditions that enabled the Salvadorans to boldly stand up and choose Mauricio Funes.

When I was in El Salvador for Mauricio Funes's inauguration in June, I can't remember a week in my life when I have cried or laughed so much. A lot of the crying was about remembering the people who didn't live to see the arc of the universe bend toward justice. It was also about being thanked constantly for the role that I, that UUSC, and that all of you had played in helping them get to where they are today. And that's why I'm preaching this sermon, because I promised them I would thank all of you.

There are many stories I could tell you about the generosity, courage, and determination of Salvadorans. I gained much more than I gave in that year. I am alive because people nursed me back to health when I had malaria and there was nothing to treat it with. I am alive because people would slip me their egg or their tortilla because they were so worried about my well-being.

During those war years I met some mean and scary people as well as some very interesting and inspiring ones. Some activists in Nebraska once made an appointment for me to see their governor, a Vietnam veteran, a medal of honor winner, whose name was Bob Kerrey. He listened earnestly and said he would do what he could, but governors, he explained, had little influence on foreign policy. When he was eventually elected to the Senate, he stood up to President Reagan and voted to end the war. I was once in Hollywood when Bob Kerrey was there raising money for his first Senate race. At a fundraiser someone put her face right in his and asked in a loud, cynical manner, "Don't you think we ought to quit supporting all of these lazy people living high off the hog on welfare?"

Kerrey looked her right in the eye and said very gently, but very firmly, that in Vietnam half his foot was blown away, that he languished for months in hospitals, helpless, unable to walk, and as a former Navy Seal unsure if he wanted to go on in life as someone who would surely never run and perhaps not walk without crutches. He said, "If it weren't for the welfare system of the U.S. military, I might not be here today. There may be times in all of our lives when we are physically helpless or emotionally overwhelmed and perhaps need a hand. That's what the welfare system is about, not reaching down to us, but reaching across to us and being there for us until we can be on our feet again." The woman who asked the question was caught up in the emotion of his heartfelt answer and applauded with everyone else in the room.

I like to think that's what all of us did collectively for El Salvador. We reached out to them in a moment of dire need. When our government was sending a message of death and destruction, we chose to send one of dignity and worth.

Switching back to the recent presidential election, you can imagine that, though he was a journalist in the war and never carried a weapon, the propaganda against Funes was fierce. It included some members of the U.S. Congress who hinted that, if Funes were elected, the U.S. government would prevent Salvadorans here from sending home the small regular remittances from their paychecks. Those small remittances, often \$20 to \$40, amount to over \$3 billion and are the largest source of revenue in

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their gross national product. There were rumors that this man, who visited and prayed at Romero's tomb the morning of his inauguration, would destroy the church, because the right wing accused him—like President Obama—of being a communist.

We helped end the war, helped rebuild lives and communities, and Salvadorans not only stood on their own feet again, but they went to the ballot boxes in the face of death threats and intimidation giving voice to Oscar Romero's promise to rise again in the Salvadoran people. This was truly a resurrection in our time.

Though winning the election with only the slimmest of margins with 51 percent of the vote, a poll six months after the election showed that Funes had the support of nearly 72 percent of Salvadorans, when they discovered that he didn't have horns and a tail as depicted by the right in the election.

UUSC does not work in El Salvador today, but we do work in twenty-five countries around the world. And though known for our work abroad, we are very active here at home. Last year we played a decisive role in helping to raise the minimum wage in Kansas City from \$2.65 an hour to the federal minimum. Earlier this year we passed a bill in the California Assembly and Senate that would have guaranteed the human right to water to all residents of that state, but the "Governator" refused to sign it despite unanimous support from the Los Angeles and San Francisco city councils. We'll bring it back when he's termed out of office.

Our work is only possible because of your generosity. You can help youth become members for \$10 a year, seniors can be members for \$20 a year, and adults for \$40 a year. Most people don't know that we do not receive any direct financial support from the UUA. So I thank you for what you helped make possible in El Salvador over several decades, and I thank you for what you make possible today. I would like to recognize and especially thank Wendy Wintermute and Karen Carruthers, who serve First Unitarian as UUSC local representatives. I also want to recognize and thank David Colton for both his service on our board of trustees and as regional coordinator of an area that stretches from the border of Mexico to the border of Canada!

We think of ourselves as a human rights organization that represents you and your values every day in many parts of the world where oppression is being confronted and justice is in short supply.

Defending human rights demands that we say no to the propaganda of war and no to the corporations that benefit from killing. Instead, we will say yes to our culture that honors women, because they, more than men, nurture life. Yes to our culture that honors the sun, because it, more than oil, produces life. Yes to our culture that honors water, because it, more than the stock market, sustains life. And yes to our culture that honors the seasons and decency and human dignity, because they all illuminate life. While property is important, it is not more important to us than life itself. The seeds of this culture have been planted by ministers and laypersons in Unitarian and Universalist congregations, which for more than 150 years have been in the forefront of the effort to keep our ship of state on a self-correcting course. Whether the issue is abolition, women's suffrage, the Holocaust, civil rights, Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, or equal marriage, Unitarians or Universalists or Unitarian Universalists have been there bearing witness, providing leadership, and struggling always to help us and our nation live our values.

May it always be so. Amen.