

Matthew 4:12-23
St. Andrew's Annual Meeting

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How many have a friend or relative or know someone through work who has given up on Christianity?

Perhaps someone who says religion holds no interest for them or that they can't figure out why you or anyone would want to go to church.

This could be someone who may have been wounded or rejected by a church they had once belonged to.

It could be someone, like former Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota, who said he thought religion is only for the weak or weak minded.

We all know such people. And what are they reacting to? I think they are reacting to some of the ways Christianity is presented to them which can be contrary to the essence of what Jesus himself taught.

Jesus began his ministry after hearing that John the Baptist was put in jail. And in our passage today from the Gospel according to Matthew we see him begin his ministry with the same message that John taught. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." John preached repentance, the forgiveness of sins and a turning around of one's life. All are essential to the Christian message. We who are all sinners need to know that we can turn our lives around with God's forgiveness.

But Jesus soon expanded the ministry that John had begun. At the end of today's lesson we hear that "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." Jesus was a healer.

Jesus offers us God's forgiveness, love and grace, he offers us healing also, and through his example and teachings he calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. He offers us acceptance, no matter who we are. He invited the outcasts of his day, sinners, tax

collectors, lepers, Samaritans, women, Roman soldiers, to share to share in the love of God.

Our passage from Psalm 27 reminds us “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” Matthew’s gospel also picks up on the image of the light from the Prophet Isaiah. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”

Those are words we need to hear today, that light overcomes darkness, with the tragedy of the shooting two weeks ago at a ‘Congress on your Corner’ meeting hosted by Representative Gabrielle Giffords. A number of you have told me that you shop at stores at the shopping center at Ina and Oracle. So do I. It’s where I buy my birdseed. So yesterday I went there only to find that the Wild Birds Unlimited store had moved in December.

The parking lot was full. Many people were gathered in ones or twos or even whole families at an informal shine of remembrance, which has grown there, as have others at UMC and outside Gabrielle Giffords’ office. There were signs and notes of payers for her and for the others who died or were wounded. The atmosphere was subdued as people talked in hushed tones.

On Thursday our Bishop Kirk Smith and Bishop Kincanas of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson and other religious leaders held a service of cleansing and blessing right there in the parking lot to reclaim the space for good, to reclaim it for light instead of darkness.

Because in spite of the darkness there much light also shined that day, as Jill Webb reminded me at Bible Study in Sonoita on Thursday. She spoke of the sixty-something year old woman who wrestled away the gun clip, of the older men who tackled the shooter and held him down, the young man who held up Gabrielle Giffords so she would not bleed out, the people who threw themselves over others to save their lives, some of whom themselves died in that effort.

And we remembered the heroic efforts of the first responders on the scene and of the EMTs who arrived shortly thereafter. Yes, there was light that day.

There are flowers galore, teddy bears, written plaques, posters, and hand written messages. There are banners to which those who come can add their messages. I added a message from my sermon the day after the shooting:

We are called to overcome fear with hope.

We are called to overcome violence with love.

The light overcomes the darkness.

Today is our annual meeting and it seems appropriate that our Gospel lesson includes Jesus' call to Andrew, our patron Saint, and his brother Simon Peter, to follow him and fish for people. And, the writer tells us, immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus. And they became among his most trusted disciples and in turn spread the good news of God's forgiveness, of God's healing grace, and of God's call to love others as ourselves.

Jesus also taught that we could live our lives as he did, "I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." (John 14:12)

If we believe and act on this we are unstoppable. If we believe in God's grace being available to all, we will learn to live in and share that grace. We can be part of the light that overcomes darkness. And we can invite others, as Andrew did, to become part of this loving community and to share the good news.

Amen.