

Rev. George Arceneaux

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

2/4/2024

This past Wednesday evening, I took off for a couple of days to spend time with some friends. We played board games, talked life, cooked, raced go-karts, and had a wonderful time. While they've got some background in the church, they all three consider themselves atheist. One of the best things about these friends is that we don't talk religion all that much. Except when we do.

This past Friday, one friend talked about how so many Christians, he was told, worked for the conversion of souls; that so many Christians prosteletyze and try to convert others, try to alter people's sexuality or their behaviors not only for the sake of others' eternal souls. But also for the sake of their own. That to not fight tooth and nail to convert every person on this planet is to entertain isolation and hatred from God, yes, even hell. I remember personally wondering if this was true when I was growing up, thinking of verses like from Luke 9 where Jesus says "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

I wonder if you may have friends like my own who know Christianity as a religion of control or transaction. A faith that says people should act in a certain way or be punished with eternal torment in the future and be punished now by the church community of which they are a part. That Christianity is a religion about doing good so you'll get to go to heaven in return.

So often the popular notion of Christianity is so divergent from the stories of our faith. This morning, there is no story of Jesus healing and casting out demons and spreading the good news for

any payment. He does not demand anything of those who come to him, nor does threaten anyone seeking help from him.

He just helps.

And Simon-Peter's mother-in-law is such a wonderful example of what kind of faith ours is. Jesus goes home for the night with his new friends whom he has just called to be disciples and he heals this sick woman. And our scripture tells us, "the fever left her and she began to serve them."

The story of Simon-Peter's mother-in-law doesn't simply end with Jesus healing her. The miracle isn't so simple as that. It's that when Jesus served her she served them.

The spread of the gospel is not one of forced conversion and threat. It's not the message "join us or die." It is spread because our souls are made as soil for seeds of kindness. The spread of the Gospel is not done through tyranny but through action and teaching. Through helping those in pain or need and thus modelling goodness.

Desmond Tutu once wrote, "We are each made for goodness, love and compassion. Our lives are transformed as much as the world is when we live with these truths." To live such truths out is not always easy. Jesus says as much throughout the Gospel that we may be hated for belief in a gentler world or in acting out love. The man himself was pursued to the point of death on a cross.

Fear and hurt can be taught so easily especially to those in need. Those who are hungry or oppressed or impoverished. It can be so easy to say "those foreigners over there, those jews, those people who are less educated or who just don't get it" they're the problem. But that is not what Jesus does. He doesn't spread "bad news" about "bad people" making our lives "bad."

There's a reason the Gospel is good news. It's that we are made for goodness. That the news is spread through goodness, that goodness begets goodness, that when we serve others and teach

service... well service is taught. And they serve others. And teach is in return. The teens of St. Christopher's are right now getting ready to serve up sausages, crepes, and pancakes. Why? Well I suppose you could ask them, but I suspect its because they have learned to serve because of those around them, including those in this church.

We don't always get service right. Heck that's why I love when we read about Peter, on different Sundays, never forget, the rock upon which Jesus founded the church was a perpetual screw up. But the gospel, it may start with Jesus, but it spreads through us. And it is not through threat and coercion. It's through being the service minister and showing up, through the good mornings at the front of the church and the farewells at the end.

Let's do our best to not let ourselves be swayed by bad news and fear, rather let us find the abundance in each other and In the world, especially when that abundance is covered up in woe. There's enough good to spread and there will always be enough because of the God whose love never ceases. Amen.