

Sam Collins – pledge campaign talk – October 15, 2023

I was asked to speak today about the pledge campaign, and why I choose to participate. I would like instead to give you a thumbnail sketch, not only of why I tithe, but of part of the journey over the last five years that led me to be standing here before you today.

The first time I ever came to Incarnation was on the Sunday after Easter, 2019. After the service, I was greeted by the guy who had delivered the sermon, and was dressed in priestly robes, but I thought he was way too young to be a priest, and so must be a deacon, and/or a member of the high school youth group.

When I first came to incarnation, I was living in a homeless shelter called “Sam Jones.” It’s over on Finley Avenue, near the border between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol. I had started living there about five months before that, after I moved to the Santa Rosa area, which was after I had been evicted from my apartment in San Rafael. I was evicted from my apartment while I was in the Kaiser hospital in Terra Linda—on what they call a “5150” hold—that’s code for suicide watch. I had been admitted to the hospital after I tried to kill myself at the end of August of 2018.

Nine months before that, and just twelve days before Christmas in 2017, my wife Shelley died, and to say the least, I didn’t deal with it very well. To say that my world fell out from underneath me when she died would be an understatement. For the first time in twenty-eight years, I celebrated Christmas all by myself. And then, six days later, at midnight on New Year’s Eve—for the first time in twenty-eight years—I didn’t have anybody to kiss at midnight. Then came my birthday in February, followed by Valentine’s Day.

I think you can see where I’m going with this.

Over the next six months, I lost almost sixty pounds, mostly because I’d just stopped eating. I also lost my job, went through what little savings we had had, plus the small stipend from her life insurance policy. And I couldn’t stop crying.

By the end of that summer, 2018, I was receiving letters from the sheriff’s department and my landlords telling me I was going to be forcibly removed from the property, and although I can honestly say I truly did not “want” to die.... but I couldn’t even begin to see a way forward. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, any time I tried to pray to God.... it was like someone had slammed a door in my face, and then only a cruel silence. I literally lost my ability to pray / to even find the words to say. It was like someone had deleted such thoughts from my mind.

When I was finally released from the hospital, I didn’t have a home anymore, and so I started living out of my Honda van until I was finally admitted two months later to Sam Jones in the fall of 2018, where I would live, on and off, for the next two years.

After my first Sunday here, I started attending Sunday services regularly and coming to morning prayer several times a week. Morning prayer was pretty easy for me to attend back then because, after I had timed out of Sam Jones and was living out of my van once again, on more than one occasion I parked and slept in my van, either on Cherry Street, or in the church parking lot.

If any of the people who attend morning prayer ever suspected I was doing that, they never said a word. They, in fact, welcomed me with open arms, as did Stephen, as did quite a few of the other members of this church. And although I never lied about being homeless, I can honestly say that I was never / ever / made / to feel / like an outsider / a vagrant / a homeless person / or anything other than welcome. And when about two years ago that van I've been telling you about finally died and I didn't have any way of getting around, there were members of this congregation who literally contributed to a version of a "go fund me" effort.... and helped me buy the car I'm still driving around in to this day.

To say that I am the beneficiary of what Tennessee Williams called "the kindness of strangers" would be an understatement. But I am reminded at this moment of one of Jesus' most famous parables, and one which applies absolutely as far as me talking about the pledge campaign today. It's the one that Jesus tells in response to the young lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" That's when he tells the story about the Good Samaritan.

You guys, I've been to a lot of different churches in my lifetime and have talked both online and in person with quite a few people who call themselves "Christian" and I can say with absolute assuredness that most people I've known who use that name have no idea what Jesus meant when he told that parable.

Most people—at least in this country—who call themselves "Christian" think that their "neighbor" is someone sitting in the pew next to them; and definitely someone who "looks" like them; worships like them; thinks like them; and clearly not someone with a funny sounding last name; or who speaks with a foreign accent; let alone somebody who loves and sleeps with another person of the same gender.... or someone walking through their church's front door.... who looks like he's homeless.

The members of this congregation understand Jesus' definition of the word "neighbor" better than the vast majority of Christians I've ever known. I'm living proof of that. When I first came to incarnation, I wasn't looking for a handout.... just a hand / and a hug/ metaphorically, and literally. I have received both many times over, but the friendship, and the love I have received from this man over here [gestures toward Stephen], and from all the staff and clergy, as well as so many of you, has exceeded anything I ever imagined possible.

Next month will mark my second anniversary living in my own apartment for the first time since August of 2018. Last June marked my third anniversary working for a company in San Francisco called "the warm line," where I answer phones remotely from my home for people who are calling in for emotional support. Next to teaching, it is the best and most rewarding job I have ever had.

So, when you are considering either becoming a tithing member, or continuing your contributions, please remember another of Jesus' parables, the one about the sower, and remember that just because perhaps you won't see on a daily basis the good that the ministries at this church do, you need to know that they do / and are, making a difference in this community. As I said before, I'm living proof of that. and I'm not standing up here giving myself a pat on the back; quite the contrary. So many of you have already done that for me.

And so now it is "I" who thanks you for coming into my life, and I who applauds you / for all that you do.

To those of you who know me and have been a part of my journey out of a.... terrible darkness.... back into the light, I thank you with all my heart. May God bless you, and may God bless this wonderful congregation.