

Sermon at Grace St Paul's
January 8, 2012
Steve Farley

O God, lend us the strength to love one another, without exception,
lend us the courage to forgive the hurts we absorb from one another,
And lend us the wisdom to make our words worthy of your spirit.

Amen.

For those of you who do not know me, I am Steve Farley. I was baptized here by Father Gordon at the Easter Vigil 12 years ago, so I am humbled to be able to give a sermon as we honor the baptism of Jesus.

I am also your State Representative in the Arizona Legislature, but please don't hold that against me.

I know we are still in early January, but I want to share with you an Easter story today.

Exactly one year ago, at almost exactly this very minute, I received a phone call that would change my life and reveal an event that would shake all Tucsonans to our core.

I was driving with my family to a legislative gathering when my campaign manager Daniel Hernandez called the bluetooth in our Prius. Daniel and I had become very close over the previous year, and we consider him part of our family, so I was always happy to hear from him. I asked how he was doing. He said simply...

"Gabby's been shot."

We have all experienced Good Friday moments like this where everything changes in a flash. That moment you find out that your mom has dementia. That a friend has been killed in a car crash. That

your appendix has burst. These moments are part of being human. But that does not make them any easier to take.

I have been friends with Gabby for many years, and I was friends with many of the people who were attending Congress On Your Corner that morning. Your mind does not know how to process information so horrible, so unexpected.

Daniel was calling from the ambulance, as he held Gabby's head in his hands. He had rushed toward the bullets to tend to her, and his actions to keep her conscious and upright as he applied pressure to the wound are widely credited with saving her life. He told us to call Gabby's mom Gloria and her husband Mark, and get to UMC to help however we could.

We turned around the car and headed to the hospital. I first responded with deep anger. How could this happen to someone so young, so brilliant, so optimistic, so much a part of a brighter future for all of us. How could she be taken from us when we needed her so badly right now?

As we walked up the emergency room driveway and encountered Daniel standing alone covered in blood, the anger gave way to quiet grieving calm. This horrible thing had indeed happened. We didn't yet know who was hurt or how badly. We didn't know if there were more attackers out there, or even if they might come to the hospital. We only knew that among the victims would be many friends. Anger would not help now. We must wait and watch.

We waited with Gloria and Ron Barber's family in a small room, as the spirit of love came to comfort us. My wife Kelly led us in prayer. My 11-year-old daughter GiGi kneeled at the feet of Gabby's mom, held her hands and looked lovingly into her eyes. My 16-year-old daughter Amelia put her arms around her shoulders.

It was that spirit of love and hope which sustained us all for the rest of

that day, and carried us over those moments of doubt when we had heard reports outside the hospital that Gabby had died, even though the surgeons assured us she was very much alive.

That spirit of love and hope helped console us in our deep grief when we heard that my friend Gabe Zimmerman had not survived, and that nine-year-old Christina Taylor-Green had been taken from us, along with Judge Roll, Dorwan Stoddard, Dot Morris, and Phyllis Schneck.

That spirit of love and hope drove hundreds of people to gather on the lawn outside the hospital that night leaving candles and chanting with me, "You can't stop hope with a bullet. You can't stop love with a bullet. You can't stop faith with a bullet."

Thank God, the next day was Sunday. I think I was not the only one hungering for redemption.

Many of you heard me talk about the shootings from this pulpit before the 10am service on January 9, 2011. I spoke of how this horror had strengthened my Christian faith, and how I was all the more committed to follow Jesus' greatest commandment, to love one another, without exception, no matter how hard that may be.

As one who has a career in politics, I am surrounded by conflict, anger, and sometimes hatred in all directions. I also have a career in public art in which I am surrounded by beauty, community, and great love.

I have myself been guilty of speaking in anger at those with whom I disagree politically. But the sheer horror of January 8, 2011, has deeply changed the way I conduct myself in my political life. I keep at the top of my mind the time-honored quote: "Be kind to all you meet, for each is fighting a great battle," even if I feel under attack. I truly believe that there is no other path to God but through love, forgiveness, and kindness. Even in the face of unspeakable horror.

As we look back at where we have been, we can also look to the future in hope. We have survived -- and as a community, I believe we have experienced a deep Easter renewal. As the Easter story teaches us, we can find Good News even out of terrible events.

There will be those in our community who will not always use the best of judgment -- auctioning off Glock pistols to raise money for their preferred political party, or selling Christmas photos of families holding machine guns next to Santa Claus. Many of our political leaders will continue to say hurtful things and enact hurtful policies.

But if we are each individually able to respond with love and forgiveness instead of anger and hatred, we can break that cycle which has brought such shame, derision, and horror onto us here in Arizona in recent years. We can actively support policies and statements that are worthy of those whom we have lost last January, that are worthy of our newly redeemed community.

God bless and protect each and every one of you, and may you be infused with an Easter spirit of love and renewal throughout 2012.