



What the World Needs Now



A Sermon By
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September 11, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-09-11-AWW.mp3>.

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Luke 15:1-10

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
Grace Episcopal Church
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 11, 2016

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Luke 15:1-2

As many of you know, I have been on sabbatical for the last three months, and I can honestly say: it feels so good to be back. I want to thank the Vestry, the staff and all of you for giving me the time away. It was a wonderful summer for me, my wife and our boys. I particularly want to acknowledge and thank Rev. Amanda for her leadership while I was gone. We are all very blessed to have Rev. Amanda here at Grace Church, and that is especially true for me.

The word *sabbatical* is derived from an old Hebrew word *shabat*, meaning “cease,” or “rest,” and the notion of a sabbatical traces its roots back to the Bible. In the Book of Genesis, the story of creation describes how God made the world in seven days, and on that seventh day, when the heavens and earth were finished and God saw everything he had made was good, God rested. God blessed and hallowed the seventh day, and in the Ten Commandments, God instructed the people of Israel to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

For my sabbatical, the plan was to write as much of my Doctor of Ministry thesis as possible, to do a lot of running, which is one of my hobbies, to spend time with family and friends, and to simply rest and relax, to experience Sabbath.

You can probably imagine how I felt the first morning of sabbatical. When I finally got out of bed, I thought I might fritter the day away, lie around reading a book, maybe play 18 holes of golf. It was such a good feeling. Then, I walked into the kitchen and found a yellow “stickie,” which my wife had left on the counter, with the words, “Things for you to do today,” written across the top. And, then, there was the list: Get the car washed; clean out under our bed; vacuum.

Unbeknownst to me, my wife also had a plan for my sabbatical. She seemed to think sabbatical meant stay home and do chores for your wife. Every morning, I would wake up and there would be a yellow stickie. Pay the bills; empty out the storage closet; give the dog a bath. Day after day, yellow stickie after yellow stickie. Wash the floors; clean the windows, clean the sheets. Finally, I woke up one day and, of course, there was the yellow stickie; and, all it said was: we need more yellow stickies...

As my sabbatical went on, and I was able to make progress toward my goals, I slowly found myself feeling disconnected from the world. Most of the time I was all alone, writing my thesis in our

apartment, going for a jog, watching a movie on television. I was in my own little bubble, with not too much to worry about, which normally would have been fine, but as we all know, this was a summer in which we witnessed a lot of sadness and tragedy. While I was lounging by the pool, drinking frozen adult beverages, a man entered the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and killed 49 people. While I walked around the golf course, trying to get the ball in the hole, a terrorist attack in Nice left 86 dead and 434 wounded. And, while I enjoyed travelling to places from North Carolina to New York, in other places, like Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Falcon Heights, Minnesota, there were more police shootings of unarmed black men, followed by the sniper attack on police officers in Dallas, Texas.

The contrast between my life on sabbatical and life out in the world was stark, and the contrast was difficult to process, because there were not that many people around with whom I could talk and share my feelings. I was pretty much on my own all summer, doing my own thing, and so it was hard to make sense of what was happening. I had all of these questions running around in my head and no one to ask: Why do these events continue to occur? Is this just the way life is today? Isn't there anything we can do about it?

Looking around the world, there seems to be so much fear, resentment, intolerance and hatred, but I suppose it's always been that way. There is something in our human DNA that makes us marginalize those who are different from us. Back in the time of Jesus, for example, there were a group of Jews known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees were very faithful people, devoted to God and committed to living their lives by the Law of Moses. The Law was full of rules, covering every aspect of human life, right down to the tiniest little details, and the Pharisees followed every, single one of them. There was no bending the rules with the Pharisees, and if you did, if you broke the rules, if you lived outside the Law, the Pharisees wanted absolutely nothing to do with you. You were labeled unclean, or a sinner.

Then, Jesus came along. Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher of the Jewish faith, but he was breaking all the rules. Jesus would talk to a Samaritan woman, touch a leper, heal someone on the Sabbath. All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus, and the Pharisees couldn't stand it. They detested Jesus because they thought his faith was bad. In the Pharisees' minds, Jesus was not being true to God. He was not a good Jew. And, the Pharisees were filled with contempt and disdain for Jesus: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

We all have a little Pharisee in us. We have the tendency to be self-righteous, holier-than-thou, our way is always the right way, and we look askance at those who are different than us. At best, the most open and accepting of us carry a small unconscious bias against other people based upon their race, their culture, their religion or sexuality. At worst, it is outright prejudice, intolerance and hatred, and taken to the extreme, this enmity can lead to violence. That is what happened to Jesus all those year ago, when the Jewish and Roman authorities crucified him on the cross, and that is what we see happening in the world today.

But, it doesn't have to be this way.

In the days following the Pulse nightclub shooting, a group of well-known actors and actresses from Broadway wanted to do something to support the LGBT community, so they came together to raise money by recording an old Burt Bacharach song, which you can download on itunes. Everyone from Audra McDonald and Lin-Manuel Miranda to Nathan Lane and Whoopi Goldberg participated, offering a beautiful and poignant response to the tragedy. "What the world needs now," they sang, "is love, sweet love, [because] it's the only thing that there's just too little of."

Jesus brought that love into the world. He brought love with him wherever he went; and, not just for some; but, for everyone. Jesus was full of compassion and understanding and acceptance for those who were different, because Jesus knew: *God is love*. If that meant breaking rules, Jesus broke the rules. If that meant upsetting the Pharisees, Jesus upset the Pharisees. Jesus knew God loves each and every one of us so much; God is like a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and losing one of them, leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one that is lost. That is how precious we are to God. That is how much God loves us.

God's love, God's grace, is amazing.

As followers of Jesus, we are supposed to follow his example, and so for this program year, our theme is *Sharing Grace*. We will be sharing God's grace with each other and with those around us. There will be practical, tangible ways for you to get involved in *Sharing Grace*: by listening to fellow parishioners as they talk about how they experience God's grace and then learning to share your own faith story, as well; by inviting others to visit Grace Church so they can know a community of unconditional welcome and acceptance; and, by participating in one of our outreach and social justice projects to share God's grace with those beyond our church walls.

As we move through the year, you will be hearing more about *Sharing Grace*, and we hope every single person here will participate, because what the world needs now is love, sweet love. And, Grace Church is gonna bring it.

Amen.