



In the End



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at:
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2016-11-20-AWW.mp3>.

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Luke 23:33-43

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
Grace Episcopal Church
The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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*W When they came to the place that is called The Skull,
they crucified there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

Luke 23:33

Back at the end of August, I began preparing for my sermons this fall, just like I always do. I reviewed the Sundays' readings, made some notes, did a little research, and came up with a few ideas, which I outlined on paper. At the time, this morning's Gospel reading had me stumped and, over the last several months, as I continued to come back to it, I still had difficulty formulating any message. The reading is Luke's account of the crucifixion. It is the story of Good Friday, and Good Friday seems so out of place in November. Good Friday belongs in the spring when the weather is getting warmer, and the days getting longer. Good Friday goes with Easter, and all the joy that day brings. What could I, or would I, possibly say about Good Friday in November?

And then, we had an election.

Over the last twelve days, I have witnessed a great deal of pain, and I have seen a lot of tears shed. I heard from many parents who are afraid for their children, because they are Muslim, or people of color, or immigrants. I heard from some LGBT friends who are concerned their civil rights will be taken away. I exchanged emails with a professor at a nearby university who had to stand in front of his class the morning after the election. His students come from a variety of backgrounds, races, cultures and faiths, and the professor lost it in front of the class because he didn't know what to say. I spoke with one of our parishioners, a government employee, who overheard a coworker, an African-American, being called the "n" word. I talked with our son, who is a senior in college, and learned many of the young women on campus, his friends, are terribly upset, because of the misogynistic language used by the President-Elect. And, most of us probably know of the hates crimes that have recently taken place across Montgomery County, including at the Episcopal Church of Our Saviour right here in Silver Spring, where the words, "Trump Nation; Whites Only;" were written on the outdoor sign publicizing their Latino service.

At the same time, I have also heard from parishioners and other people whose family and friends voted for Mr. Trump, not because they accept his derogatory language, in fact, they out right condemn it, but because they believed he could bring the economic change they so

desperately need. Now, they feel like they are being labeled as racist, fascist, anti-women, anti-gay, anti-immigrant, and the emotional burden is weighing on them. They feel guilty about what is going on, and they don't know what to say. They don't know what to do. And, they are struggling.

So, it feels like Good Friday to me.

Good Friday was an awful day, just about the most awful day you can possibly imagine. A dastardly, evil act was committed. Hurtful and nasty things were said. All around, emotions were running high. Some people were angry. Some were scared. Others stood by watching. Some even scoffed. Everyone who was there knew it was a decisive moment – they knew it was big – but they did not fully understand how or why. And, when it was all over, when Jesus was finally dead, no one really knew what would come next.

I think that is where we are right now. No one knows what to do. We are still in shock, coming to grips with everything that has happened, on election night and in the days since, and we are left with a lot of questions: Where do we go from here? How do we move forward? What can we do to make things better?

I do not claim to have all the answers to those questions, but for us, here, I believe the path forward begins in recommitting ourselves to the way of Jesus, following his example of empathy and compassion. On Good Friday, Jesus did the most miraculous of things, the most unheard-of of things: in the midst of his own suffering, he forgave the very people who tortured him. He didn't hate them. He didn't curse them. He didn't abuse them. Jesus loved them. Amidst the darkness that was Good Friday, Jesus revealed the light of God by sharing God's grace with everyone who stood around the cross: the soldiers, the bystanders, the criminals hanging beside him... everyone.

Right now, we have that same opportunity. We can show people what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We can share God's grace with everyone, no matter who they are, where they come from, what they look like, or whether they are Republican, Democrat, or Independent. We can disagree about political issues, and yet, still respect one another and embrace one another other in community. This has always been part our Anglican and Episcopal tradition, and it is at the heart of Grace Church, where diversity is our number one core value. Despite our differences, we are united to each other through God, and we are all part of God's one, big, global family.

So, let me say: if you voted for Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton, if you voted for Gary Johnson or Jill Stein, you are welcome here. You are welcome here, because this is the Lord's house, and the invitation to be here, to hear God's word and gather at the Lord's Table, does not come from us. The invitation comes directly from the Lord himself, from the God who made each and every one of us in God's own image and whose imprint is on our hearts and souls

from the day we were born, until the day we die. We are all God's children, and therefore, we are all welcome in God's house.

All that being said, there is a clear biblical imperative to care for those who are marginalized by society: the poor and the hungry, the lost and forgotten, the last and the least. The Old Testament prophets tell us to love justice and do mercy, and the New Testament describes Jesus' particular affection for the outcast and sinner, for women and children. God wants all of God's children to live and thrive and have their being in peace and joy and fulfillment, to have the kind of life God dreams for them, and since that is God's will, it must be our will, as well.

At baptism, we promise to persevere in resisting evil and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Those cannot be words we just say a few times a year. We must commit to honoring those words and keeping the promises we make before God. Our lives should demonstrate that we are followers of Jesus, and everyone who meets us and everyone who knows us should understand who we are, what we are about, what we believe in and what we stand for.

Here, at Grace Church:

We stand for dignity, equality, justice, and love.

We stand against prejudice, bigotry, hatred and violence.

We stand with our Muslim brothers and sisters; our LBGT friends and family; the foreigner, the refugee, and the immigrant.

We stand against racism, of any kind, in any form; and, we stand against any and all language that objectifies women.

We do this because we want to and because we have to, for that is what it means to uphold our baptismal covenant and seek the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. We do this, because that is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Now, we all know following the way of Jesus is not easy. It is hard, really hard. There is an inherent tension to what I have said this morning, because in standing up for what we believe, we must simultaneously love those who stand against us, no matter how strident they might be. This may sound crazy and absurd, but it is the way of Jesus, for it was Jesus who said, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," and it was Jesus, hanging from the cross, who forgave those who hammered in the nails.

Of course, we are not Jesus, and we will not always get it right. Hopefully, we will get it right more often than not, but you never know, which is why, in the end, we have to believe in God's unfailing mercy and love. In the midst of dark days, we have to have put our faith in

God. That is the ultimate lesson from Good Friday. There is nothing God cannot handle. As bad as things might seem, God can take care of it.

On Good Friday, everything seemed hopeless and lost. Jesus was dead. God's love had been killed. But, Good Friday was not the end of the story. The end of the story is Easter, and even in the middle of our darkest days, it is important for us to remember that. God's love may be killed, but God's love will not stay dead and buried. God's love will rise again, and in the end, love wins the day, love triumphs over hate, love conquers the grave. In the end, God will come out on top, and all evil will be swept away. God will have the last word, and in the end, Christ our King will reign, forever and ever.

Amen.

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