



Wade in the Water



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

February 5, 2017
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/2017/02/2017-02-05-AWW.mp3>.

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter
Grace Episcopal Church
The Fifth Sunday of Epiphany
January 22, 2017

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16

Once a month, the clergy serving multicultural congregations gather for a meeting hosted by the diocese. We talk about the blessings and challenges of multicultural ministry, what's happening in our churches, and what's going on in our lives, as well.

At a meeting not too long ago, we were going around the table, doing our usual check-in, when one of the priests, a woman of color, said, "Well, I was pulled over by the police yesterday."

She said it with a smile on her face and a chuckle in her voice, but you could tell she was masking her real emotions, because it took a few moments before she could share the story.

She had been driving home one afternoon, and was not very far from her house, when suddenly, the flashing lights of a police car appeared in her rearview mirror. She pulled the car off the road and into an empty parking lot, her mind running through the last mile or two, wondering what she might have done wrong, but she was pretty sure she obeyed all the laws, which only made her feel suspicious and anxious.

When the police officer approached the car, he asked for her license and registration, which the priest dutifully presented. "Excuse me, officer," she said. "But, why did you pull me over?"

She asked politely and respectfully, not raising her voice at all, which is pretty out of character for this extraverted, talkative, willing to speak her mind priest, but she wanted to be careful with the officer.

The policeman did not answer, as he continued reviewing her license and registration, so the priest asked again: "Excuse me, but why did you pull me over?"

After another moment or two, the officer said the model of her car didn't match the registration. The registration said she owned a Ford, while the car she was driving was a Mercury. The priest told the officer Mercurys were made by Ford, but they're not made anymore, so that's how the car needs to be registered. And then, she said, "But, you didn't know what my registration said when you pulled me over, so why did you pull me over?"

The policeman didn't answer. Then, handing back her license and registration, told the priest she could go, but she should be careful driving.

As the priest finished sharing her story, the rest of us sat there in silence for a moment, taking it all in, before someone asked, "So, why did he pull you over?"

And, we all knew the answer: "Because I'm black," she cried.

As I listened to my friend's story, I thought back to the last time I was pulled over by the police. It was many years earlier, when our boys were still young and I was not yet a priest. The boys and I were going to the train station to pick my wife up from work, when a cop appeared behind me. He said I was speeding, but I knew I that wasn't right. I had been driving pretty slowly, while other cars went whizzing by, so I disagreed with the officer, and the two of us went back and forth:

You were speeding. No I wasn't.

I got you on radar. You got the wrong car.

License and registration please. Give me your name and badge number.

The conversation became pretty heated and, I have to admit, I was rude and disrespectful and obnoxious. Finally, the officer handed me a ticket, saying, "Just pay the fine."

And, I said, "I'll see you in court."

Then, I took the ticket, rolled up my window and drove off, pushing the accelerator all the way to the floor, just to make my point. That's how angry I was.

As I sat at the table with my clergy colleagues, listening to my friend's story and reflecting back on my own, I wondered what would have happened if my friend acted the way I had. Instead of being polite, respectful and careful, what if she had been angry, rude and insistent? Was that even an option for her? Could she have behaved that way without any repercussions?

I think the answer is probably not.

We want to believe everyone is treated equally in this country, and yet, we all know that is not true. People who look like me have unseen, unearned advantages that come with being viewed as the norm in America,¹ and our society has a history of discrimination against people who are seen as "different." At one time or another, up to and including right now, we have suffered from Japanophobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, and sexism. We have been anti-Semitic, anti-Mexican, anti-refugee and anti-immigrant. I could have begun this sermon with a story that highlighted any of those fears and biases, and I know, I know, that is true for many of us.

¹ Washington Post Online, "What is White Privilege?" January 16, 2016.

Yet, racism is our original sin. Racism was closely intertwined with the founding of this nation, and it is still with us today, embedded in our institutions, organizations, systems and economy. As a result, the sin of racism affects all of us, making justice elusive, liberty lopsided, and the kingdom of God a dream deferred.

The question for all of us, as followers of Jesus, is: what are we going to do about?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, asked that same question almost 75 years ago, though he said it far more eloquently. Reflecting on his home country, and his own life, Bonhoeffer wrote:

*We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds: we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretense; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward men [and women]. Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness?*²

Here at Grace Church, diversity is our number one core value. We welcome everyone, no matter their race, religion, sexual orientation, country of origin or political affiliation. We seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. We embrace the outcast, the sinner, and those who have been banned. We are committed to listening and understanding and compassion. We strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

And, right now, the world needs people like that. The world needs plain, honest, straightforward men and women who want to build bridges and not walls; who to bring people together not separate them; who want to offer healing and not division. Right now, the world needs places like Grace Church.

Jesus said, “*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*”

So, that is what we are going to do. We are going to let our light shine before others.

Because Grace Church is a thriving, cohesive and racially diverse congregation, with a passion for justice and equality, we are uniquely positioned to be a unifying voice for racial justice. If we cannot discuss issues of race in this community, where we so greatly cherish our diversity, then there is little hope of having a wider conversation out there in the world.

² New Year’s Day Letter, 1943. Published in *After Ten Years: A Reckoning Made at the New Year 1943*.

That is why, today, we kick-off our new ministry for racial justice.

The formation of this ministry began almost a year when the Rector, clergy, Vestry and other lay leaders felt God was calling us to this important work. We shared a common belief that Grace Church needed to be more intentional about deepening our relationships with one another across our diverse congregation and to be more actively engaged in efforts for racial justice.

Our new ministry is called *Wade in the Water*, and its mission is to deepen our connections and solidarity as a community across race and ethnicity; to raise awareness of and interrupt racism; and to take action on important causes related to racial justice within and beyond the Grace Church community. There will be opportunities for everyone to participate through learning, education, training and action in our community, and I invite you, I encourage you, to get involved. The first event is a potluck supper and conversation this coming Friday, and other upcoming events are highlighted in your bulletin, as well.

I realize this new ministry might make some of you nervous and anxious. You don't know what to expect, and I get it. I feel nervous and anxious, too, as does the Vestry, because we all understand there is no issue in this country more sensitive, more loaded, than race. But, we are going to do this the Grace Church way, with humility, sensitivity, compassion and love, trusting in the Lord who calls us to this work, and remembering the words that appear in the Bible over and over and over again: *Do not be afraid*.

Or, as Howard Thurman, longtime Dean of the Chapel at Howard University, put it: "Do not shrink from moving confidently out into the choppy seas [but] wade in the water..."³

Amen.

³ Howard Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*.