

**A Sermon in Observance of All Saints' Day**  
**Grace Episcopal Church**  
**November 4, 2018 | Rick Elgandy**

Good morning. In case you're visiting with us or you and I haven't yet met, I'm Rick Elgandy, and I'm chairing the Stewardship Committee this year. At Grace, we see Stewardship not only as a means to keeping the doors open and the lights on (though it is!), but as part of our spiritual and communal life. So the powers that be have handed the pulpit to me this morning, which I promise I will return to professionally-trained hands next week.

As many of you know, I first found Grace when I was in college up the hill. A group of us – Hannah, Rebecca, and Tim, usually – would come down every Sunday (or at least every Sunday on which we could rouse ourselves awake in time) for the 10:30 service. We found Grace to be a place of hospitable welcome then, which included tolerance of our giggling as Hannah and I would make up alternative words to some of the hymns – she got me every time with those trilled “r”s – and some rustling as I would hand out dollar bills to the crew to contribute to the offering.

I followed my vocation to the academic life back home to Chicago about a year after I discovered our church. After finishing grad school some unspecified number of years later, I returned again to Washington, and to Grace. And that back and forth rhythm – a return to a second home, a new life set in a familiar place – was what came to mind as I read through the lectionary readings that recognize All Saints' Day this year.

\*\*\*

“See, I am making all things new.” That moment is, as I've always read it, the climactic moment of the end of the New Testament's crescendo in the book of Revelation. A new heaven and a new earth take the place of that which has passed away. The new Jerusalem appears, that city of peace that represents our aspirations for unbroken solidarity and wholeness. Both the first epistle of John and Paul, in first Corinthians, also say that the world (or the form of this world) is passing away: that loss is the shadow cast by the great Love made substantial, promised to be present, in this reading.

But there is a very deep truth of the faith at stake in understanding this well – something we might call by various names: the rhythm between the old and the new, the harmony between the preservation and fulfillment, the unity between the God of creation and the God of redemption. The first few generations of Christians wrestled often with these questions: what was the relationship of those who followed “the way” to those who remained exclusively in the synagogues (all of whom, at least for a long while, would have thought of themselves as Jewish)? Should gentiles receive a welcome into the community that takes the shape of circumcision? Does the redemption presented in God's “new covenant” make good on or replace what had been established with Abraham? The anti-Semitism that provides the

theological cover for the sort of violence visited upon the Tree of Life Synagogue last weekend is the result of, among other things, failure in precisely this aspect of our theological imagination.

In the ancient world, it was common to separate the world of matter, or body, or creation – all of which were seen as burdens, or sources of evil – from the good or beauty of mind, soul, or spirit, and in so doing to divide the Creator and the Redeemer. Many Christians were tempted by this way of thinking, and it often took the form of rejecting the material world, and disbelief in the one who gave rise to it (as well as to the Jewish traditions, from which they emerged, who worshipped that God).

The early church – after all the grandstanding, confusion, and sniping that have come to characterize virtually all of our important discussions – decided that it was crucially important to preserve the Hebrew Bible as Christian scripture, to see the covenant God made with Abraham as preserved and reiterated in the covenant’s extension to the whole world, and to perceive the goodness and the beauty that endures in a fallen world. Thus, today we still say, along with the Psalmist whose words we have just heard, that *this* earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it. The whole earth groans, awaiting the new life that will transform it, remaking it according to the pattern of love into the ancient future that has been the hope, however named, of every poet, every philosopher, every utopian dreamer, every activist, every preacher. But that new life is the restoration, the blossoming of that which God has already given us.

That’s why it would have made no sense for Jesus to have told Mary and Martha that Lazarus would be saved “from” the body: they (all three) were Jewish, and they knew God precisely as the source of all that is wondrous about the body, whatever its faults and frailties. They knew, as Isaiah hoped for, that the power of God is to swallow up death itself, thereby “taking away our disgrace” – and in this exceptional case, as an interruption in the course of history, not at its end. But we believe that a time will come for the restoration of all things, when the great cloud of witnesses whom we honor on All Saints’ Day will obtain life of a sort that we cannot yet fathom, and when the world itself will give way to the deeper, wilder beauty already hidden within it.

In that light, Genesis recounts its story: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth...,” and John’s Gospel his own: “In the beginning was the Word...,” the structural rhyme between them suggesting a second movement in the same piece of music. The waters over which the Spirit hovers at creation are parted by God the Deliverer during the Exodus, and later sanctified as the waters of baptism, which we will call forth on Ava’s behalf later this morning. The work of Love to make all things new is the work of breathing life into our world, a life that will conform us to that work as we are ourselves caught up in the systole and diastole of love, the rhythms of new life.

\*\*\*

All of which brings me to the promptings I have the unique privilege of offering as chair of the Stewardship Committee. You may be familiar with the widespread idea that Christianity pertains properly to the spirit, and only incidentally to the body, to the natural environment, to politics, and yes, to the world of labor, work, and money. But I have excellent news: this is entirely false. We know it, we feel in our bones that it can’t be true, because no matter how

much our body causes us to experience suffering as well as joy, and no matter how difficult our material circumstances, we know that something about us is at stake in the world of creation, the world to which we pray God's Kingdom will come, and not just in our redemption in the "sweet by and by." The pattern of love given to us in faith matters, pun intended: it reorients what's possible for us in the material world. That's not a promise that everything that ails the body can be fixed by prayer or that faithful giving will lead to financial stability. But it is a summons to a full, undivided life, each dimension of which echoes the love that we profess. Stewardship isn't just about keeping the lights on: it's about faithfulness to God's activity of making all things new.

So the first thing I want to say is thank you. The Stewardship Campaign begins anew every fall – and since we're an unendowed church, the count starts at zero – but we should still be grateful for the long record of generosity we have at Grace. Because you and your predecessors embodied such generosity, that 21-year-old version of me had a place to experience the joy of our semi-improvised hymns with a goofy group of friends, not to mention the sacraments, the teaching from the pulpit, and some new friends here, whom I've gotten to know better this second time around. The gifts this church gave me then and continue to give now are vital to my spiritual life, but are mediated by our common work and resources. No one ever asked me to pay for those when I needed them, but they aren't free. I'm moved by what I've been given here, and I'm confident you are, too.

The second thing I want to say is that this doesn't work without each of us. We've seen that this year more than at any other moment in my time here: we have recognized and put into practice the fact that *we*, collectively – and not the building and not the clergy and staff (though they're excellent) and not someone else but *we* – are Grace Church. We come to well-crafted services on Sunday morning, but we do the liturgy, the "work of the people," together in whatever we do. That's part of the lesson of All Saints' Day: the long, often quiet faithfulness of the great multitude around us – a multitude extended with each baptism – that makes all the difference in how we experience our lives. We enact that faithfulness as wisely as we can when we work, when we pray, when we vote, when we rest, and when we share what we have. There's joy in that, not least because it connects us with our forebears through the ages who have worked to provide us with what we inherit.

Today, we have about \$230,000 pledged for 2019, and it will take a significant effort from us to get to the 2018 level of \$410,000. You know what that budget represents: our support for the diocese and its reach through the region; our participation in the Georgetown Ministry Center; our incomparable music programs; maintaining our grounds and buildings as sites of hospitality; our tireless staff; and much more. Most of us feel icky talking about money in church, and reasonably so, since too many churches don't earn the trust they receive. But candidly, I care about all that we are and do too much to be bashful about asking you to support it.

There are pledge packets in the back available for your use: you could grab one during the passing of the peace, fill it out, and drop it in the offering. You've probably heard from a member of the Stewardship Committee already, whom you can contact. If you're visiting with us this morning, I'm very happy to consider your patience with a stewardship sermon a great gift to the church, and I hope you feel welcome here as I have. And if you just can't contribute this

year – you’ll know this, and we’ll trust it – then you can rely on us to be here for you, with our usual open hearts and open door.

But if it’s you I’m addressing here – and *you’ll* know this – then I’m asking you to join with us to guarantee that Grace can continue to be the rare community of thoughtful welcome that it is. When you do that, you’re giving a part of yourself over to those rhythms of grace that would claim us ever anew, no matter how many times they have before.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Amen.