

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, writes in his book *Love is the Way Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* about a phrase his father used on him during a moment of frustration when Bishop Curry was a little boy growing up in Buffalo: "You know, The Lord didn't put you here to consume oxygen." It's a phrase perhaps any parent, teacher, professor, caregiver, or anyone who works with people in any capacity can relate to. It's a phrase that strikes at the heart of a question many people ask themselves during this time of the year when the academic year is ending, and they look to what is next after graduation or after getting one year closer to graduating from school. But this question isn't just for graduates. It's a question all of us consider at least at once in our lives. It's the question: why are we here?

Often we attempt to answer this question in a form of production, of doing. After all, Bishop Curry's father was right, there is more to life than consuming resources. We are expected to participate in life. Even our act of breathing isn't one sided. We consume oxygen, and we exhale carbon dioxide which plants absorb, process and release oxygen. Therefore we might assume our reason for existence is to reproduce; or to work at a job, earn money which we spend or save, to participate in the economy. For others their reason for existence is to create art; whether it's visual, poetry, literature, or music. Still others believe the reason for our existence is to make the world a better place by establishing service agencies to help people, animals or the planet or work for research facilities to discover new products or advances in science, technology, and medicine.

None of these answers are wrong. These are all needed professions and vocations. But they weren't the answer Bishop Curry's father had in mind. Nor are they what was on Jesus' mind in today's Gospel reading. The section of John's Gospel we have for today is another part of Jesus' very long goodbye speech given to his disciples before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. We are given pieces of this speech to examine during the season of Easter because they can help us understand why Jesus was here, how his resurrection helps answer the question why are we here.

The reason, mentioned no less than nine times in today's Gospel, can be summed up in a single four-letter word: Love. Love, Jesus said is why he came, because God loves him, and he loves his followers and because he loves them, they are to love each other. According to Jesus we are all here for one reason. Not to consume. Not to produce. But to receive and give and participate in love.

Before we go any further, we need to acknowledge there are possibly as many definitions for the word *love* as there are reasons for existence and Jesus was not referring to all those possibilities. He wasn't talking about romantic feelings or sentiment. He wasn't referring to a favorite confection or product to consume. Nor was he referring to a transaction. Jesus was talking about a specific love that has little to do with emotion. He was talking about what his life, ministry, death, and resurrection revealed. For followers of Jesus love isn't a feeling. Love is a choice and a decision; it is a verb, an action. In the words of Bishop Curry, the love Jesus is talking about is "a firm commitment to act for the well-being of someone other than yourself."

We need to be clear this is not about staying in an abusive or toxic situation. It is not about allowing someone to harm you or anyone else, because the truth is that doesn't help anyone's wellbeing.

The love Jesus gives and calls us into is liberating, it frees us from oppressive systems. But this freedom of love isn't the freedom to do as we please. This love can seem quite demanding, as we also see in today's Gospel reading, when Jesus commanded his disciples not only love each other as he loved them, they also are supposed to bear fruit. This can sound sort of nebulous. Some of us might struggle to think of a concrete example of this concept in action in a real life.

This is what Bishop Curry writes about in his book; how people who made this love their way of life helped influence and shape him and his ministry. That is why he calls his book *the Way of Love*. Bishop Curry mentions lots of people who showed him what self-sacrificing love looks like in everyday life. One person I remember from his book is a woman who at first didn't appear to be capable of bearing much so-called fruit. Her name was Ruth, and Bishop Curry met her when he was five years old. She was the person who made and altered and washed and ironed and kept track of all the robes worn by acolytes and choir members in his father's parish. Ruth had two prosthetic legs. She lost her legs in a house fire and while she was recovering in the hospital became depressed and began to despair, worried she'd lose her mobility permanently. She told her priest she worried she'd be unable to contribute anything ever again nor serve God or the church. She prayed God to deliver her from her despair. After she got her prosthetic legs she was so overjoyed, she committed herself to serve God. Being a seamstress, she decided to care for and make all the liturgical robes the parish needed. She spent many an hour fitting children, including a very young Bishop Curry, in their vestments.

Years later, when he was visiting home while attending seminary, now all grown up, Bishop Curry writes how Ruth hugged him and shared a side of her he'd never seen before. "I got prosthetic legs, but you were all my children. You'll go places I'll never go," she said. It was then Bishop Curry understood living the way of love, sharing her gifts, getting to know the children of the parish, had healed Ruth in a way she hadn't anticipated when she was recovering in the hospital. Bishop Curry was not only moved in that moment, he found himself dwelling in the love Jesus was talking about, the love that helps create God's Kingdom here on earth.

This way of love isn't so much about making the world better, it's about letting go of selfishness and making room for the way God hopes and dreams we can all be. It has been so foundational for him, Bishop Curry worked with people in the Episcopal Church to create a method of teaching and inspiring us all to participate in this selfless love he himself has experienced. Not surprisingly, he calls it *The Way of Love* and it's seven components can help us all of better understand and live the love of God in Christ. I've mentioned them before, but sometimes it can be helpful to revisit them. There are such models or programs, all with the intention to invite us to practice what Jesus preached. This is just one, but all of them serve as an invitation to apply the tenants of our faith to our everyday lives and how living this way of love can help bring the Kingdom of God closer to the here and now. These seven components of The Way of Love are: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Rest, and Go.

Turn is another word for repentance, a church term meaning to turn from self and toward God. Repentance is difficult because it calls for a type of letting go that is a form of death to selfishness and requires tough self-examination. We all have things we can let go of; things that have more to do with selfishness and greed than the well-being of all of us. Things like stereotypes and prejudice, racism and sexism, cynicism, and elitism. The temptation to look at another human being, a fellow child of God and see their flaws, shortcomings, and quirks and judge them as less which might help us feel better or overlook our flaws. Turning involves acknowledging there are aspects of us we can let die.

Turn isn't just about what we turn away from. It's turning toward God. It's committing to look at the world and everyone and everything in it with the love of God who created it. Even the people who voted differently than you. And the people who refuse to wear a mask during the pandemic. The people who cause you anxiety. Turning involves practicing forgiveness; both giving and asking for forgiveness. Turning opens the door of grace, inviting God into the deepest parts of ourselves that need healing and hope and renewal.

Another aspect of The Way of Love is **learn**. Not as a chore of drudgery but as a joy of discovery. Learn invites us into far more than scripture study and book studies (although they are part of it). Learn invites us to see the whole world as a place of revelation. God is present in God's creation, so there's no telling where we might encounter the Risen Christ. It can happen when we listen to our neighbors, notice what is happening in our town, school, city, or workplace. Sometimes we'll observe a need, other times a cause to celebrate, other times, those rare and miraculous times, we'll even see something or someone who had been in our community who we hadn't noticed before. Learning can be energizing. It can also lead to connection to a community, parish, family, and Jesus.

Although **pray** might seem an all too obvious part of The Way of Love, it can be misunderstood or taken for granted. Prayer is a form of conversation between us and God, one that author, pastor, and professor at Valparaiso University, Walter Wangerin, writes in his book *Whole Prayer* is initiated by God. He also writes how prayer is just as much the practice of listening to God as it is talking to God, and keeping the conversation going even when God doesn't answer you the way you expect or want. Prayer doesn't only happen verbally. Some prayers are colors, or body movements, or sitting quietly in contemplation. The joy is connecting to God through all types of prayer.

Worship has gotten complicated during the pandemic with so many changes made to so many church services, such as transitioning to on-line services. In some ways, the transition has made it possible for us to discover and learn about lots of other parishes, denominations, and other types of worship services like Compline that are being live streamed daily. In other ways, the transition can seem overwhelming, offering too many choices, and might make watching church too much like watching a television show. That's when it can be helpful to remember *worship* isn't about what clergy do while you watch. And it isn't "going to church". Worship is the spiritual practice of giving God glory by giving God your attention. The parts of church services like prayers, hymns, sermons, scripture readings, and Holy Communion aren't presented to you to consume like an entertainment, or critique like a presentation. They are intended to create a time

and space for you to come close to God and God to come close to you. Many have found that can still happen on-line. Others found creating a space in their home helped them worship. Still others used this time of pandemic to discover how true it is that no matter where they are, God is there.

I've heard the word **ble^ss** a lot more since I moved to Southeastern Ohio. It's usually followed by the words "their heart" and serves as a prequel to criticism. But that is not what Bishop Curry meant by including this word in the practice of love. To bless is to put our love into action through relationship. To know and be known as a living example of Jesus. Many times this looks like participating in ministries like feeding ministries. Being a blessing is adapting our free lunch program into a 24-hour free food pantry during the pandemic; giving away free face masks and creating sacred space to acknowledge loss and grief through the COVID-19 memorial. To bless is to intentionally participate in our community in any way that helps reveal and invite people to come close to Jesus.

The word **rest** can be as difficult to understand as love. Rest can mean a cessation of labor. It can also mean backing off from an argument or project; like when someone tells you to "give it a rest." Throughout his life, trial and crucifixion Jesus modeled another type of rest. The kind of rest we might be needing more than ever right now. The kind of rest that helps counter anxiety and worry. The kind of rest that can carry us through suffering or grief as we heal. Jesus showed us when things got stressful he retreated to a place by himself to rest and pray. When he was being tried unjustly and abused, he rested in God's love and care instead of fighting back. This type of resting might be one of the most challenging practices of the way of love, because it causes us to admit we can't control everything and everyone, that we can only do what we can do, and trust God might not make every situation turn out the way we want it but can use it for good. When we rest in God, we can recognize when to get ourselves out of God's way, let God work.

The last of the seven Ways of Love is **go**. God's love is so wonderful, so big, so amazing, so unexpected, so different from the ways of the world we just can't keep it for ourselves. We have to share it. Not only through ministry, but through our very lives. Like Ruth. Like Bishop Curry and his father. This part will take our whole lives and will look different for each of us, depending on where we go, and what we bring with us. But all together, living and practicing the love God has already given to us, we'll help God create heaven here on earth.

If this all sound impossible, it's not. It's the Way of Love. It's why we are here.