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**What Happened in an Airport**

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When you think of airports, images of lines, TSA employees, uncomfortable chairs, and the looming threat of delays and canceled flights probably come to mind. What you probably do not imagine is a meeting of some of the most prominent clergy, lay people, scholars, and the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. Yet that is precisely what happened in the Atlanta airport just a few years ago when the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop, invited specific people together to meet with him to discuss a very important question concerning the future and present of the Episcopal Church. They didn't meet in an upscale restaurant or club or convention center. Bishop Curry didn't wine and dine them. Instead, they met somewhere in the airport, where they celebrated Eucharist together, said prayers, and then engaged in a conversation around a question Bishop Curry had asked but didn't know how to answer. The question they tackled together was HOW, how would the Episcopal Church go deeper as the Jesus Movement not just in word and action, but for real?

It's a deep question. A tough question. It is a question that isn't just about what we look like as a denomination called the Episcopal Church. It is a question that isn't about our literature, websites, or pamphlets. It's a question that isn't about our programs and their appeal or how affective they are. It's a question that goes to the core of our identity, to the very thing that motivates our words and our actions, that sustains us when things are difficult, challenging, sad, tragic, or unjust and is what we celebrate when we experience joy and well-being. It's a question that Bishop Curry himself says goes back to today's Gospel lesson where, even though we are in the middle of the season of Easter celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, today's Gospel takes us back to the last supper. And we are once again confronted with all that goes with the last supper: the betrayal of Judas, the disciples struggle to understand, and Jesus bringing them all together as his little children to tell them the important stuff they need to know before his crucifixion and resurrection.

We must be careful not to think Jesus was being condescending or patronizing when he called his disciples "little children". This was a term used by the Johannine community, one of the earliest groups of followers of Jesus, and where the Gospel of John is believed to have originated from. The term children or little children was a term much like ya'all or all ya'all, it was an inclusive term that acknowledged everyone who followed Jesus as a child of God, no matter their age, gender, race, religious background, politics, etc. Scholars and historians like to remind us that those early communities of Jesus followers were more diverse than they might appear in our

imaginings or in visual representations created by entertainers and artists. There was – and when the church is at its best there still can be – something about following Jesus that appeals and calls to many different people. And part of the beauty of the Christian faith, when it is at its best, is there is room from all of us, despite our differences. No matter who we are, how old we are, how long we've been attending, our gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or identity, or the other ways we try and segregate each other, all who follow Jesus are God's children.

So, Jesus using the term little children in today's Gospel is a reminder that God loves us and welcomes us all and always has. Part of following Jesus, then, is welcoming others, not because we have to, but because we want to because that's what Jesus asked his followers to do, so that we'd be known for our love of Jesus.

Like we heard at the end of today's Gospel reading.

And that is the very thing the Presiding Bishop wanted to address in that meeting in the Atlanta airport: how could he and the national church help all of us in the Episcopal Church live into that command Jesus gave his followers the night of the last supper: to love each other as Jesus loves, so that all the world will know us, as a community and individuals, by that love.

Bishop Curry said the meeting got off to a tough start, with folks pushing him for more information and he pushing back at them, and so it went, back and forth until everyone in the room came to a very important realization, one certainly inspired by the Holy Spirit. They realized they didn't need a new program for the church. That's quite a big realization, because it seems to me that the Church, like so many businesses, is always looking for the newest, flashiest, shiniest, most appealing program or product that promises to be the easy solution to any problem. Deciding we don't need anything new is quite a surprise.

The group in the meeting realized they didn't need anything new because they already had everything they needed in the traditions of the church. They just needed to remind us of those traditions and encourage us to try to live into those traditions today.

That's where the 7 Practices of the Way of Love come from. Perhaps you remember them: they are summarized in 7 words: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest. Each word is deeply rooted in scriptures and ancient practices of faith from monastic communities. Turn is about repenting, changing direction when something isn't working and trying a different way, one oriented toward God. Learn is about spending time with the scriptures every day, contemplating the life of Jesus, or reading materials like commentaries to help guide us. Pray is about communicating with God,

whether it's through the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer, such as the Daily Office, or saying a prayer a day, or praying with color, or meditation- there are so many ways to pray – but what is important is putting the many methods of prayer to use, to practice praying. Worship is about attending church as part of a community, to experience giving glory to God and what it can be like when a community of faith can carry you through a service when it's hard for you to participate fully, and know there may be times when you are the one carrying someone else. Bless is a good word to remind us there is more to life than complaining or noticing what is wrong; that there are opportunities to receive God's blessings, to be a blessing to someone, and to be a blessing to the community we are in by our presence and our ministries. Go is a wonderful word that says we need to do more than talk, we need to try our ideas, see what happens, and trust God. We don't always have to have all the answers, instead we can be more like Jesus on that night of the last supper and trust God and let ourselves be part of God's work instead of trying to control it, even if we don't always understand it. And finally, rest is important not just for making sure we care for our physical, mental, and emotional well-being, but the reminder to rest in God's arms of love.

I know I've preached and taught on these 7 Practices of the Way of Love before, and some of you are very good at remembering all 7 words, which makes me proud and believe you are working with me on doing them. But every now and then, I believe it is good to be reminded of things like this, especially why we are putting effort into them. Not just because the Presiding Bishop told us to, or because the idea for them came from some clandestine meeting in an unusual place, but because the hope and intent behind them goes back to the very roots and seeds of our Christian faith: the very command Jesus gave when everything was going to change for him and his disciples and he was attempting to prepare them to be followers not of a teacher or miracle worker, but the risen Jesus. The hope behind the 7 Practices of the Ways of Love is to help us grow deeper as individuals and parishes in the Episcopal Church so that we will experience what it is like to bear the fruits of the Love of God in Jesus and then scatter the seeds of God's Love into the world.

The purpose of the church isn't to grow so big it bursts its seams or has so much money it can give its preachers a millionaire's lifestyle. The purpose is simply to follow the Risen Jesus where he leads us, into our communities, and to go forth into the world so that the world can look upon us and see beyond our appearances, our politics, our foibles, even our mistakes and see the Love of God in Jesus that may be inviting them to join us and realize they too are God's beloved children. When we say it that way, it can be exciting, but it also might be daunting. That's why breaking that big picture of the Way of Love down into 7 practices can be helpful, because it reminds us, we don't

have to do it all at once, just one step or practice at a time. And eventually, perhaps without even noticing it, as we keep practicing, we will find ourselves living into the Way of Love in ways that might delight and surprise us, enlighten and encourage us, and we'll gain the deeper insight that it's been us and the Holy Spirit working together all along. For only the Holy Spirit could bring such a powerful revelation out in a meeting in an airport.