

September 16, 2018
St. Nick's

Hosea 2:14-20
2 Corinthians 3:1-6
Mark 2:13-22
Psalm 103:1-13, 22

Way of Love Sermon Series: Turn

Today we begin a seven week series on something that Bp Michael Curry introduced at our National Church's General Convention this past summer. It's titled the Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus Centered Life. It isn't a structured program or a course or a checklist but an invitation to all of us to develop a Rule of Life, a way of living, that responds to Jesus' statement "follow me."

It is a framework to enable us all to live into our vocation as the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement, to help us "together grow more deeply with Jesus Christ as the center of our lives, so we can bear witness to his Way of Love in and for the world."

There are seven parts: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest.

We begin with Turn - hearing Jesus' ask each of us individually and as a community to follow him and choosing to answer that call with our lives.

In the church I grew up in, we had altar calls every Sunday. For those familiar with them, don't fret, we aren't going to have one today. For those who aren't familiar with them, it went something like this: At the end of the service, after we'd sung some songs, listened to scripture and a 20 to 30 minute sermon, and watched one or more folks get baptized or re-baptized, the pastor would ask who was ready to turn to Jesus. We'd stand and sing a hymn, with our heads bowed and eyes closed while the pastor waited up front for folks to come forward to give their lives over to Christ for the first time or to re-dedicate themselves for the umpteenth time. Sometimes it would go on for just a few minutes and sometimes it would last 10, 15, 20 minutes, or even longer until someone finally came forward.

It was part of the rhythm of our church life to constantly be publicly rededicating ourselves to Jesus because we were taught that if we didn't feel the "mountain high" of faith at all times, that meant we'd somehow "fallen away" or worse had become "back sliders" and needed to start all over and be baptized again.

Remember a few weeks ago when I talked about living as disciples in the ordinary time? This long season we call Pentecost in our church calendar year is about living the Way of Jesus in the every day, that God is present at all times, even if we don't "feel" it. When we don't "feel it" it isn't God who is lacking but our awareness of his presence in all things and at all times.

I do believe we all face an "altar call" from time to time - times in our lives when God makes us aware that we've stepped aside from the path, the Way he's shown us to our own path and we need to turn and reorient ourselves back to The Way.

As we've talked about, our life with Jesus isn't to be lived on the mountaintop but in the every day moments. Paul tells the Corinthians, "Our Competence is from God." Through our baptism, we've been made new in Jesus, not through anything we do but through the power of God's love. We aren't a patched piece of fabric or an old wineskin, but a brand new child of God. Like all children, we get messy sometimes and need to tidy up, but we don't ever need to be remade.

Baptism, whether it be as an infant or young child or at a time when we make the choice to be baptized, isn't about the human action of being sprinkled with or immersed in water. It is about the power of God within the sacrament of new birth.

The human actions in baptism are the outward sign of God's inner grace. In the water of baptism we "are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." It is God, by the power of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the water so "that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior."

Our salvation, our ability to be in deep, personal relationship with God our loving creator, has nothing to do with our own abilities and power, but relies entirely on God's grace and forgiveness and the actions of God the Son who came to live and die as one of us. When we choose to follow Jesus, yes, we DO take on responsibilities, just as we would in any other intentional relationship. When we turn toward Jesus we are to live our lives on earth as it is in heaven, revealing the light and love of God to the world in all that we do.

There are times when we all step off the path God has intended for us and we stop building his Kingdom and focus too much on our own. But we can not "undo" what God has done for us through his love.

Our baptism is about turning: We turn away from the forces and evil powers of this world that rebel against God and we turn to Jesus Christ promising to follow and obey him.

In the baptism service, we all renew our baptismal vows, to remind ourselves of God's continual presence and transforming power in our lives - in the every day ordinary moments and in the grand celebrations and in the deep lows and darkness. This reminder of our baptismal covenant is the Episcopal version of an altar call, a reminder of who God calls us to be.

We baptize as a community, promising together to do all in our power to support each other in our lives in Christ. We are not in this as lone rangers but as a unified and bound body of believers, not only bound to each other but to God who loves us unconditionally and desires a deep relationship with each of us and who promises us that through him all things are possible.

God makes us his forever, as the prophet Hosea tells us, in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and mercy. God alone enables us to know him. And as Paul says, He makes us to be competent ministers of the new covenant.

"Like the disciples, we are called by Jesus to follow the Way of Love. With God's help, we can turn from the powers of sin, hatred, fear, injustice, and oppressions toward the way of truth, love, hope, justice, and freedom. In turning, we reorient our lives to Jesus Christ, falling in love again, again, and again."

I believe that each and every time we gather for worship and fellowship and service we are rededicating ourselves to the Way so that we, with God's help, can live our whole life as a response to Jesus' invitation to "follow him".

Like with all relationships we have to intentionally cultivate our relationship with God. He will never leave or forsake us but we have to open ourselves up to the awareness of his presence in all things.

As you go through your week, I want you to think about these three questions:

- What practices help you to turn again and again to Jesus Christ and the Way of Love?
- How will (or do) you incorporate these practices into your rhythm of life?
- Who will be your companion as you turn toward Jesus Christ?

Don't worry if you get to write them down, I will put them up on our website and our facebook page, but please do take time to reflect on them and act on them.

Also, as you leave, you will find these tags with the Way of Love logo on them. The logo is significant - everything is centered in the Cross and there isn't a step by step process but pieces that shape our life in Christ. Take one and hang it somewhere that as many folks as possible will see it - on your purse or briefcase or backpack or gym bag and if anyone asks you about it, invite them to St. Nicholas. Commit yourself to coming each of the next six weeks as we continue to talk about the framework of the Way of Love.

Together, with God's help, we will learn how to more deeply live a Jesus-centered Life so that through us God's light will shine into this world. Amen.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love>

The Book of Common Prayer