

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
December 1, 2024 – The First Sunday of Advent  
“The Way of Love”  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

On October 31<sup>st</sup> this year Bishop Michael Curry ended his 9-year term as Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. In that time, he consistently and vehemently emphasized that the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is love. As he said, “If it’s not about love, it is not about God.” The season of Advent, the church’s time of preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus, is the perfect time to focus on love. For, in the words of the poet Christina Rossetti, “Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine: Love was born at Christmas, Star and angels gave the sign.”

This Advent we will explore “The Way of Love” that Bishop Curry outlined for our church. I think of this as a homage to a remarkable Christian whose teaching will, I hope, live on in our church as we move forward. Curry identified seven “Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life.” Over the course of the four Sundays in Advent my sermons will focus on these seven practices. On the table in the narthex you can pick up a handout on “The Way of Love” as well as an Advent Calendar for daily use based on the seven practices.

The first section of “The Way of Love” handout is Bishop Curry’s statement of what we seek as people who follow Jesus:

“We seek love: To know God’s love, to love, and be loved by others, and yes, to love ourselves. We seek freedom: From the many forces – sin, fear, oppression, and division – that pull us from living as God created us to be: dignified, whole, and free. We seek abundant life: A life overflowing with joy, peace, generosity, and delight. A life where there is enough for all because we all share with abandon. A life of meaning, given back to God and lived for others. We seek Jesus: The way of Jesus is the Way of Love, and that way has the power to change lives and change the world.”

The second section of the handout lists the seven practices for a Jesus-Centered Life. The first practice is “Turn: Pause, listen, and choose to follow Jesus.” In Mark’s Gospel we find a very succinct account of Jesus calling someone to follow him (2:14): “As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at a tax booth, and he said to him ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.” Bishop Curry comments on this short call story: “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 oppression 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.”

To turn to follow Jesus we must first pause. What an appropriate reminder on this first Sunday of Advent. Pause. Stop moving. Stop thinking about your secular Christmas activities. Stop writing lists of what to do and what to buy. Stop listening to advertisements. Stop shopping. Pause. This pause has power, if only we will use it to listen for God. Pause and remember what we truly desire and seek: love, freedom, abundant life, Jesus.

Now have the courage to look at how you are planning to spend the next three and a half weeks preparing for Christmas. Do your plans fit in with seeking love, freedom, abundant life, and Jesus? We only have so much time, energy, and money. What will we do with them?

How will we express our love for others most meaningfully? How will we love ourselves? How will we honor our need for freedom from anything that pulls us away from God? How will what we do give meaning to our preparation for Christmas and to our lives each day? In this season of joyful preparation, how will we spread joy by generously sharing with God's people who are in need? Where will we seek Jesus? And will others be able to glimpse Jesus through us?

Perhaps more than during any other season of the year, at Christmas time we tend to repeat "traditions," in our families, among our friends, in church. Many of these traditions are perfectly in keeping with The Way of Love. Some, perhaps, are not. We may allow ourselves to be drawn away from Jesus by the secular world, especially the world of commerce. We waste our resources. We lose our peace. We become unfit for spreading joy, peace, and delight.

Some people believe that we lack the freedom to change. But our faith teaches that we do have that freedom. Levi was a tax collector. He earned a living by working for the Romans who oppressed the Jewish people and by extorting money in excess of Roman taxes for his own use and benefit. Jesus said, "Follow me," and Levi followed. He turned his back on his former way of life and followed our Lord. We can do the same, in small ways, and we can begin this Advent by turning intentionally toward Jesus and walking in the Way of Love.

The second practice for Jesus-centered life is "Learn: Reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus' life and teachings." Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). Bishop Curry encourages us to make reading Scripture a daily practice: "By reading and reflecting on Scripture, especially the life and teachings of Jesus, we draw near to God and God's word dwells in us. When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture, we learn to see God's story and God's activity in everyday life."

"When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture." There are many ways to approach reading the Bible on our own. If we are to "fall in love again, again, and again," we need to approach Scripture with more than our minds. We need to engage our hearts as well. This is one suggestion that you might find helpful. Choose one of the four Gospels and become very familiar with it. Luke would be a good choice since we will be reading Luke in church this year and because Luke gives an account of the birth of Jesus. Begin at the beginning and each day read a small portion of the Gospel. Stop when something you read grasps your attention. It may be a circumstance of Jesus' birth, or a conversation Jesus has with his disciples, or one of his encounters with the public, some of his teaching, or his prayer to God. Center yourself in prayer. Open your heart to God. Ask God to speak to you through the words of Scripture. Then, read the words you have chosen slowly, allow your heart to dwell on whatever calls out to you from the page. It may be one word, or a visual image the words inspire, or a feeling you have about what you have read. Whatever it is, thank God for this gift and remember and ponder it as you go through your day. How might this portion of Scripture influence how you see the world, other people, yourself? How might these words help you live the Way of Love?

Today is the beginning of a new year. A perfect time to reflect on our lives as followers of Jesus. A perfect time to choose the Way of Love, to seek God with all our hearts, our minds, our strength, and our souls. A perfect time to seek Jesus, who said, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). May we all walk in the Way of Love, now and forever. Amen.