

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 8, 2024 – The Second Sunday of Advent
“The Way of Love”
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Last Sunday we began our Advent series of sermons on “The Way of Love” and the seven “Practices for Jesus-Centered Life” offered to the church by former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. The first two of the practices were “Turn: Pause, listen, and choose to follow Jesus” and “Learn: Reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus’ life and teachings.” Today we will consider the next two practices, prayer and worship.

“Pray: Dwell intentionally with God each day.” In Luke’s Gospel we read that “Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples’ (Luke 11:1). Before we look at Jesus’ reply, we should note that Jesus taught his disciples the importance of prayer primarily by his own example. Luke makes it clear that Jesus prayed often and always at important times in his life and ministry – at his baptism, before choosing the twelve apostles, at his transfiguration, and before his arrest, to name a few pivotal occasions. Jesus replies to the disciple’s request with a prayer which we know as “The Lord’s Prayer” or the “Our Father.”

First, a word about the language we use for God. Many people have great difficulty addressing God as Father because of their relationships with their earthly fathers. Images for God that come from other human relationships may also be stumbling blocks to prayer – mother, friend, or spouse, for example. It can be very helpful to expand the language we use for God. Biblical images include creator, love, shepherd, king, light, a mother hen, a rock or stronghold, living water, the bread of life, and so on. If those images help you to pray, by all means use them. No single metaphor for God is fully accurate or complete, and using many metaphors helps us remember this.

Using images for God is one way to pray, and it is the way we pray when we are gathered together in church. But there is another way to pray, the way of emptying our minds of images for God and simply resting in God’s presence. We acknowledge that God transcends human experience and is far beyond our understanding. Our souls kneel before God in adoration and wordless worship.

Back to the prayer Jesus taught his followers. In the Lord’s Prayer what we pray for is the coming of God’s kingdom, God’s rule or God’s dream, now and at the end of time. We offer this prayer as disciples of Jesus, as people whose work is to make God’s kingdom a reality to the best of our ability, in the ways God has called each of us to work. We ask for our daily bread, for what we need to sustain us as we work. We don’t ask for an abundance of bread, for much more than we need. The vision of God’s kingdom which we learn from Scripture is one where everyone has enough. As Bishop Curry writes, “We seek abundant life. A life where there is enough for all because we all share with abandon.” Of course, we sometimes fail to listen to God’s call and to work for the coming of God’s kingdom, so we ask God to forgive us, even as we acknowledge our need to forgive others for failing as we fail. The life of discipleship is difficult, there are many temptations, so we ask God to help us and, at the end, to save us. The kingdom, the power, and the glory belong – first and last – to God.

I invite you this Advent to pray the Lord’s Prayer daily. Pray slowly. Think about what you are saying to God. What does it mean to you to address God as “our Father in heaven”? What does it mean to you to “hallow” God’s name, to honor God’s name as holy? What is your

idea of God's kingdom? What would life be like if God ruled each of us and all of us? What might you do to live a "kingdom life" today and tomorrow? Take time to think of the "daily bread" you are blessed with, physically and spiritually. Then consider where and how you have failed to live by God's way of love and how you might turn back to love. Seek to have compassion on others who also fail to love. Take an honest look at the temptations you face, whatever prevents you from loving God and your neighbors and yourself. Finally, ask God to protect you from evil, wherever you find it in your life and in the world. And offer all these prayers as God's beloved child.

The fourth practice for Jesus-centered life is "Worship: Gather in community weekly to thank, praise, and dwell with God." Bishop Curry writes, "When we worship, we gather with others before God. We hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, give thanks, confess, and offer the brokenness of the world to God. As we break bread, our eyes are opened to the presence of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made one body, the body of Christ sent forth to live the Way of Love." This is an excellent description of our worship service, highlighting the main components of what we do when we gather on Sunday mornings.

Many Christians have discovered for themselves the value of taking on a discipline of regular Sunday worship. Underlying a commitment to regular attendance in church is the conviction that worship has the potential to shape us as believers and followers of Jesus. If we come to worship with minds and hearts open to God and with our attention fixed on God. If our being here together, doing what we do is centered in God and in Jesus, God incarnate. It is certainly not impossible for the Holy Spirit to reach us if we here but not fixed on God – after all, "with God all things are possible" – but it may be unlikely.

Living in a secular world, as we do, we need the support of regular worship, of the Good News we hear and remember, of the grace offered to us through the Eucharist. Many groups of Christians – for example, in communities such as the Shakers or the Amish or in monasteries and convents – wouldn't dream of attempting to live a Christian life without the support of regular worship. We might remember their wisdom when we make our choices about where to be on Sunday morning.

"By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made one body." According to St. Paul's reasoning, for the body to function in good health, all the members must work together for the common good, with Christ as head of all. I invite you to consider your role as a parishioner at St. Columba's in light of this ideal. Finally, we are to be "the body of Christ sent forth to live the Way of Love." In some Episcopal churches, the deacon or priest gives this dismissal, "Our worship has ended; now our service begins. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!" This is a good reminder of the place of worship in the Christian life. Not an end in itself, but sustenance, spiritual "daily bread," for our work of love in the world.

John the Baptist, described by Jesus as the greatest of the prophets, "proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He was the fulfillment of the words of the great prophet Isaiah, calling people to "prepare the way of the Lord." During Advent that is what we are called to do now, prepare the way of the Lord. For each of us that requires some repentance and some intentional turning toward God in our hearts and minds and lives. Prayer and worship help us in this process of preparation. May we spend this time of Advent well, making the path of the Lord just a bit straighter and a bit smoother, to the glory of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.