

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
December 15, 2024 – The Third Sunday of Advent
“The Way of Love”
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning we continue our Advent sermon series focused on “The Way of Love” and “Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life” introduced to the church by former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. The fifth practice is “Bless: Share faith and unselfishly give and serve.” Bishop Curry writes, “Jesus called his disciples to give, forgive, teach, and heal in his name. We are empowered by the Spirit to bless everyone we meet, practicing generosity and compassion, and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ with hopeful words and selfless actions. We can share our stories of blessing and invite others to the Way of Love.”

This practice for a Jesus-centered life challenges us to look at our fundamental attitude toward life and other people. Do we actively seek to be a blessing to others? We have all been blessed with gifts and talents, with all we need to live. Do we see ourselves as “blessed to be a blessing,” in other words, do we aim to be good stewards of God’s gifts to us? As Bishop Curry reminds us, by the power of the Holy Spirit we may bless the lives of others by living with generosity and compassion. Like all good preachers Bishop Curry’s words are firmly grounded in Scripture.

Listen to this teaching of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke (6:32-36): Jesus said, “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High: for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

To give without expectation of return is sacrificial giving. This is what we are called to, and it can be quite difficult. We may give all we can to someone, only to have them turn their back on us and walk out of our lives, without any gratitude for our gifts. I know this from personal experience. You may, too. Jesus knew this experience about as bitterly as anyone can, when Judas Iscariot betrayed him. We may ask ourselves, “Was my giving a waste?” Or do we have faith that with God nothing good is lost? Can we believe in the economy of self-giving love taught by Jesus: “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High”? Can we act with generosity and compassion, without knowing how any of our kind words or self-giving acts may make a positive difference to someone else? Can we be guided by the teaching of Jesus and walk by faith in the Way of Love, “expecting nothing in return”?

It is good for us to recognize the mystery of Christian life. Understanding the web of connection among the followers of Jesus in this life and the next, knowing the effects of our prayers, comprehending why God calls us to be where we are to do God’s will – I think most of this is beyond human understanding, at least in this life. But occasionally we have reason to wonder if we are getting a glimpse of the way the life of faith works.

I’ll share with you a personal story that has led me to wonder just this. I met a woman named Dorothy more than twenty-two years ago at an Episcopal church I attended in New York State. She is eighteen years older than I am, the wife of a farmer and mother of twelve children.

Dorothy and I were in the church choir together, and we share a love of music. She is a woman of deep faith, deep prayer, a committed Christian all her life, well versed in Scripture.

After I began to study spiritual direction at General Seminary in New York City, the rector of our parish appointed me to be the director of the church's Center for Spiritual Direction and Healing. I met with several parishioners for spiritual direction, and Dorothy was one of them. She had quite a few challenges in her life, and she found it helpful to talk with me. Since I left New York, Dorothy and I have continued our monthly meetings on the phone. We have been talking for about nineteen years. Because she finds our conversations helpful, I keep up my commitment. To be honest, this is often a chore. She speaks about the same problems month after month and year after year. I can think of one issue that it took her fourteen years to resolve. I remain faithful to the work because it seems right. "No expectation of return."

But I wonder about the return and about God's economy in the life of faith. Dorothy always asks about the parishes I am serving. I have occasionally shared a concern about our parish, and she will always say, "I'll pray about that." I believe she has, and I believe that her prayers may have helped. When I was new here, she asked if we had many children on Sunday. I told her we needed more children and more children have come. We even have two youth groups now! I have asked her to pray for our people when they have been very sick and for some of our members when they have died. I don't know, but perhaps her prayers have helped with healing. One gift I know she has given me is the monthly repetition of a prayer she offers when we begin our conversations, "Heavenly Father, we thank you for your love to us and for all the gifts you have given us. We ask you to direct our thoughts and guide our conversation. In Jesus' name. Amen." A humble, beautiful prayer, a prayer that catches me up short when I feel cranky about taking the time for our conversations. I hope this story may help you think about and treasure the mysteries of faith and prayer that you have experienced.

The sixth practice in "The Way of Love" is "Go: Cross boundaries, listen deeply and live like Jesus." Bishop Curry writes, "As Jesus went to the highways and byways, he sends us beyond our circles and comfort, to witness to the love, justice, and truth of God with our lips and with our lives. We go to listen with humility and to join God in healing a hurting world. We go to become Beloved Community, a people reconciled in love with God and one another."

Jesus certainly crossed boundaries in his ministry. His understanding of his mission expanded over time, beyond his own people – the Jews – to non-Jews – Gentiles – as well. He crossed the boundaries of the customs of his day in his interactions with women, with tax collectors, with Roman soldiers, with criminals. Living like Jesus means expanding our understanding of others, giving beyond our own circles of family and friends, stretching ourselves. There are deep divisions in our society and in the world. What might it mean for us to listen to this call to move beyond our "comfort zones"? Can we do the hard work of listening to people who hold different opinions? Are there ways that we can reach out to people who are different from us with genuine humility? Can we help others with compassion, without regard to the ways they differ from us? I don't think any of this is easy. But I believe that Bishop Curry is correct when he says that this is our call. And if God is calling us in this direction, then this is a call worth answering. With God's help and in Jesus' name. Amen.