

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
December 22, 2024 – The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
“The Way of Love”  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning is the last in our Advent series of sermons on “The Way of Love” and seven “Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life” offered to the church by Bishop Michael Curry. The last practice is “Rest: Receive the gift of God’s grace, peace, and restoration.” Bishop Curry writes, “From the beginning of creation, God has established the sacred pattern of going and returning, labor and rest. Especially today, God invites us to dedicate time for restoration and wholeness – within our bodies, minds, and souls, and within our communities and institutions. By resting we place our trust in God, the primary actor who brings all things to their fullness.”

Just days before Christmas you may find the call to rest impossible to heed. You have too many responsibilities, too much to do, others depending on you for their happiness this season. You may not be able to rest in the next few days, but perhaps this is a good time to be reminded of our need for rest, especially when we are overtired and stressed. The rest which Bishop Curry is talking about is something much more profound. He is speaking about doing what we need to do to work with God for our restoration and wholeness – body, mind, and spirit. This is an active and intentional practice blessed by God’s grace. Underlying this practice is our conviction that we are God’s beloved children for whom God wants wholeness and salvation.

Our bodies are, for now, central to our lives in countless ways. I invite you to think of how you use and possibly abuse your body. Do you take good care of your body, getting proper nourishment, exercise, and rest? Do you have habits that are harmful to your body? Do you treat your body as a precious gift from God, as you would want a friend to care for her or his body? How might you better honor your body, its strengths and its needs and limitations? We are called by God to properly love ourselves, including our bodies.

There are many practices we can engage in that may help us with restoration and renewal. I’ve spoken often about taking on a regular practice of gratitude. You might begin or end your day reviewing and thanking God for specific blessings. You might keep a gratitude journal. You might develop the habit of thanking God continually throughout the day for food, shelter, clothing, the people you love, the people who show you kindness, and all the many blessings which sustain and nurture you. You might develop the habit of expressing gratitude to others for how they bless your life. Gratitude helps us build hope for the future, which in turn helps us develop the resilience we need when we encounter adversity.

Another practice that supports the practice of gratitude and may contribute to your renewal is intentionally deriving as much nourishment and pleasure as you can from what you do each day through mindfulness. For example, do you pay good attention to the enjoyable food you eat? Do you appreciate the beauty of nature – the colors, the bright sunshine, the stars at night? It is easy to be so preoccupied with our thoughts and worries and plans that we miss these pleasures in life, these opportunities to be restored that are available to us each day.

Of course, we all have activities we must engage in regularly that aren’t naturally enjoyable. We may be able to eliminate some of them – and that’s something worth thinking about – but certainly not all of them. We can find restoration and renewal and a healthy balance in our lives by also spending time doing what we love to do. What do you love to do? Do you love to read, write, listen to music, or engage in a creative hobby? You might make a list, a “Do What You Love” list, and schedule time in your day or in your week to do something on that list.

We often waste time on unimportant, unnecessary activities, and when it's too late, we wonder why we used our time the way we did. Keeping in mind what you love to do can help you make choices to do those things rather than waste time.

The people we spend time with have a profound impact on our well-being. Again, we only have a certain amount of control and choice in this, but it is important to exercise what choice we have. We all know that there are people who make us feel worse instead of better. Can we reduce the time we spend with them or somehow change encounters with them for the better? On the positive side, I suggest making a list of "People Who Make Me Feel Better." These may be people who live close to you or far away – family, friends, co-workers, or people in your community. Make it a priority to connect with these people for your mutual restoration and renewal.

As Christians we know how important it is to nurture our spiritual selves, our souls. Ask yourself, "What gives life to my Spirit?" I would suggest thinking back and asking yourself what you have done in the past to nurture your Spirit. Sometimes we drop activities that it may be wise to begin again. It can also be helpful to read about spiritual practices that have been beneficial to others, see what appeals to you, and try something new. Speak to other spiritual people and share ideas and experiences, or try doing a practice together. Our Advent class on Evelyn Underhill has been a rich opportunity to share our lives of faith with others here.

Bishop Curry reminds us that we need restoration and renewal in our communities and institutions as well as in our individual lives. How might we seek such restoration and renewal in our parish? We gather in a building which we call "the church," but the church building isn't the church any more than the house in which we live is our household. The church is its members, just as a household is the people who dwell together. And the church is a special household, a household of God. The teachings and examples of the apostles and prophets are to be our foundation, and Christ is the cornerstone of that foundation. A cornerstone is the first stone set in the construction of a foundation, important since all other stones are set in reference to this stone. As a church we are called to set everything we do in reference to Christ. And we are to remember our purpose, to become "a dwelling place for God" (Ephesians 2:22). In the new year, are there ways in which we might become more truly a household of God? I suggest that we pray about this and share our ideas with one another.

God is the source of our restoration and renewal. Jesus Christ can raise us to new life. But to receive this new life we must turn to him, we must – in Bishop Curry's words – "reorient our lives to Jesus Christ, falling in love again, again, and again." Our love for God is our response to God's love for us. I would like to close this sermon series with words from "The Book of Joy," beautiful words written by another exemplary Christian, the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness and laughter – *and joy*. God, who is forever pouring out God's whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful in God's creation: the compassion of so many, the caring, the sharing." This Christmas, in the new year, and forever, may your soul be restored and renewed – saved – by this precious love of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.