

St. Paul's, Concord
August 4 & 5, 2018
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a
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Last week, when Linda spoke about King David's abusive treatment of Bathsheba and Uriah, she reminded us that David later repented of his actions – and today's reading from 2 Samuel describes how that repentance came about. Personally, I find the story of the poor man's ewe lamb and the rich man's cruelty to be one of the most heart-breaking texts in the Old Testament. And it's obvious that King David did too – although he completely missed the fact that it was a metaphor for his own atrocious behavior until the prophet Nathan pointed it out. But when that realization came to him David confessed his sin and turned back to God.

In our own lives, it's often at those moments when we recognize our complicity in wrongdoing that we're compelled to turn back to God – not just to receive forgiveness, although that's an important part of repentance, but to seek God's help in changing our ways.

It isn't always something we've done personally that causes this reaction – rather it's a painful awareness that our attitudes, our choices, our beliefs, our lifestyle, have played a part in causing someone else to suffer. Like David, we discover that heartbreak gives us the strength and resolution we need to respond to needs beyond our own desires.

In his opening sermon at General Convention, our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, introduced what he calls “The Way of Love – Practices for Jesus-Centered Life.” Recognizing that many human beings are yearning for lives of meaning and purpose, and that those can be found in abundance in the “Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement,” Bishop Curry offers us seven steps that will bring us into a closer relationship with God, with one another, and with ourselves. The steps are: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest.

The first step, “Turn” is what I've been describing, what happened to King David when he understood the full extent of his actions. Turn is another way of saying “repent.” When we allow our hearts to be broken by the consequences of human behavior – be it our own or our society's in general – when we reject that behavior we can turn back to God's ways of “truth, love, hope, justice and freedom.” As Bishop Curry says, “it's about turning from old ways that don't work, old habits that don't, turning and turning, like a flower turning in the direction of the sun.”

The second step is “Learn.” This is a call to read and reflect on Scripture, and on other inspired and inspiring writings of people of faith. Drew told me that he met someone recently who came to faith a short time ago and is already reading the Bible, cover-to-cover, for the fifth time. That's a great way of becoming familiar with Scripture – but there are plenty of others.

The daily lectionary, found at the end of the Book of Common Prayer, provides readings from the Old and New Testament, Psalms and Gospels, in a two-year cycle, for every day of the year. You can include them in Morning or Evening Prayer liturgies, or you could simply use them as a framework for your reading. Booklets like “Forward Day by Day” and other daily meditations are another good way to focus and reflect on Bible passages.

Bishop Curry observed that “the Bible is a good book. I don’t know if it’s the number one best seller on the New York Times list,” he said, “but it ought to be the number one best seller in the Episcopal Church.”

And then Bishop Curry reminded us to “Pray.” And remember, prayer doesn’t always mean reciting beautifully crafted lines like the Lord’s Prayer or the Confession or the Prayer after Communion; in fact most prayers are a jumble of words as we pour out our praise, our thanksgiving, our penitence, and our intercessions. And many prayers are completely silent as we simply experience God’s embrace.

The point of regular prayer is that it’s an intentional choice to spend time with the one who loves us beyond imagining, who is always ready to hear what we have to say, and who answers us in ways that we may fail to notice when we don’t take time to listen.

The fourth step of the Way of Love is “Worship.” People often say to me that, for them, church happens on a mountaintop, or during a solitary walk in the woods, or in a small boat on a lake. That’s when they say they feel close to God. And I’m not disagreeing: what they’re describing is certainly a spiritual experience, but it’s an experience of prayer, not of worship.

Worship involves gathering in community, on a regular basis, so that we can come closer to God through our coming closer to one another. When we pray together, hear the Good News together, receive absolution together, share God’s peace with one another, eat and drink together at God’s table – that’s how we’re empowered by the Holy Spirit and grow together as the body of Christ.

And when we’re sent out into the world to do God’s work, we do so in the knowledge that we are never alone. As members of a worshipping community, we can always draw on the love, the support, and the encouragement of our sisters and brothers in faith.

And what *is* the work God calls us to do in the world? That’s what the next step is all about: we’re called to “Bless.” You may think of a blessing as something a priest or bishop does at the end of a time of worship – or at other points in special religious ceremonies – but that’s only one small aspect of what it means to bless. The truth is that we are *all* called to be a blessing in the world. That’s why we’re known as the body of Christ because, in the words of Teresa of Avila:

“Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.”

In his incomparable way, Bishop Curry looked out at that congregation at General Convention, around 2,000 of us, and he spoke directly to each person: “Oh we have been blessed to be to be a blessing,” he said. “How can you bless this world; how can you bless others?”

And then he told us to “Go.” That’s the sixth step. Remember, we’re part of the Jesus *Movement* – not the Jesus Inertia! It’s good to come together every week for worship and fellowship, but in order to live fully into our lives of faith, we have to go beyond these walls, beyond our circles of friends, beyond our comfort zones, into the places where there is the most need.

We can talk to one another about how God has touched our lives; we can share our stories and marvel at one another’s journeys and discoveries, but we have to remember that there is a huge broken world out there – a world full of people who are longing to hear those stories, who are yearning for the love and acceptance that we experience every day of our lives.

In the words of Bishop Curry: “Go! Go and make disciples! Go and proclaim good news! Go and be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judaea, in Samaria, in first century Galilee and in twenty-first century Austin! (And I think that applies to twenty-first century Concord too.) Go!

And then he told us to “Rest.”

I’ve spoken about this before, about the importance of taking our time of Sabbath, of allowing God to refresh and restore us – and that is particularly important when we choose the “Way of Love” – when we devote our time and energy and emotions to turning, learning, praying, worshiping, blessing, and going. There’s enormous fulfillment to be found in practicing a Jesus-centered life but it takes effort, and it can be exhausting. It’s essential to follow each cycle of steps with intentional, life-giving rest.

But first we need to take the first step; we need to turn. We need to recognize those things that are hurting our world and its creatures – including our fellow human beings. We need to allow our hearts to be broken. At General Convention, there were many, many heart-breaking moments: the immigrant women at the windows of Hutto Detention Center; the parents of Carmen Schentrup, who was killed at Stoneman Douglas High School; the victims of drought in Africa, and habitat destruction in Alaska; testimonies of countless survivors of sexual abuse; and the all-pervading ravages of poverty and war.

Every time we heard or saw evidence of cruelty and suffering, our hearts broke a little more. Believe me, there are a lot of tears at General Convention! It’s so much more than a dry legislative event. And the proof of that is that the heartbreak inspired us all to turn, to repent of our part in the atrocities we were witnessing. And then, we continued to work our way through the remaining steps of The Way of Love.

We learned from extraordinary preaching; we prayed from the depths of our hearts; we worshiped in a rich variety of ways – including a rocking revival at the Palmer Events Center! And then we did our best to bless the people around us – the Convention Center and hotel staff, the homeless people who thronged the sidewalks, and of course each other.

The sixth step, “Go,” was an easy one to follow because, at the end of the ten days, after many hours of listening, discussing, and adopting resolutions that will make our Church more effective and bring positive change to our world, we left the Convention Center and got in our cars or boarded our planes.

And for me – and I hope for many others – a time of rest followed immediately with our family vacation.

But now the cycle begins again, because The Way of Love is never-ending. My heart will break again, and again, and again, but it doesn't end there, thank God. And I hope you'll join me on this journey of healing and growth.

Turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, and rest.

A closing prayer from Bishop Curry:

I pray that we will grow as communities
following the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus.
His way has the power to change each of our lives
and to change this world.
Amen.