

St. Paul's, Concord
September 22 & 23, 2018
Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37
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Today we're starting a new sermon series on the theme of The Way of Love. You may remember, from my sermon at the beginning of August, that Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, introduced this new initiative at General Convention. He described The Way of Love as "Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life" – and he offered us seven steps that will bring us into a closer relationship with God, with one another, and with ourselves. If you were here for Invitation Sunday, you'll know that we featured those seven steps in conjunction with our seven main ministry areas. The steps are: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest – and I'm beginning with "Turn."

Turn is another way of saying "repent." It's an action that requires us to recognize any wrong or misguided behaviors we're indulging in, rejecting those behaviors, and choosing to 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."

This past week people of the Jewish faith celebrated their holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Beginning at sundown on Tuesday and finishing at sundown on Wednesday, they spent their time fasting, attending nearly non-stop worship services, repenting, and praying for forgiveness for the ways they've fallen short in being the person God created them to be.

Yom Kippur is based in the concept that people are basically good, that our core desire is to do the right thing. But, as we all know, there are many influences that prevent us from achieving that aim. Bad habits, temptations, resentments, weaknesses of all kinds can lead us away from the path that God longs for us to follow. One of the most powerful influences we experience is envy – which is the example I'm using today.

Our reading from Proverbs describes a woman who is kind, diligent, hardworking, a devoted homemaker and a wonderful wife and mother. She's compassionate, creative, wise, trustworthy, and generous. She has her own business, she earns her own money, she invests in her own property – and she appears to need very little sleep! Now I know that the writer of Proverbs 31 intended this "virtuous woman" to be an inspiration – a composite model of ideal womanhood that we can aspire to while accepting that we're never going to be that paragon. I understand that the most important aspect of this remarkable person is her devotion to God and her recognition that God is both the focus and the source of all that's important in her life and work.

Unfortunately we *don't* always see that. I'm afraid there are days when we look at that woman in Proverbs and she just makes us sick. We don't see God at work in her, we're oblivious to the lives she's touched and the good things she's done; we just want what she has. And by that I mean we want her wealth and her beauty and her grace; we want her well-behaved children and her good investments and her un-mortgaged home; we want her artistic talent and her energy and her great wardrobe. In other words, we have what is referred to in the letter of James as "bitter envy and selfish ambition in our hearts." (James 3:14)

James goes on to describe how that envy and ambition, those “cravings that are at war within (us),” how they can trigger some of the most abhorrent human acts imaginable. (James 4:2) “For where there is envy and selfish ambition,” he writes, “there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. (James 3:16)

God urges us to turn our backs on those cravings at war within us; in the words of our baptismal promises, to “renounce all sinful desires that draw (us) from the love of God” and to “turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as (our) Savior.” This turning – both away from and toward – is an essential first step in walking the Way of Love. And the Virtuous Woman passage offers a way to acknowledge the emotions that can be triggered in us, responses that cause us to choose the wrong path – the one that brings out the worst in us instead of the best.

The passage *can* provoke the “bitter envy and selfish ambition” (James 3:14) that James refers to, which makes it a very helpful teaching aid for the point I’m trying to make! Reading about that paragon of virtue and success can make us feel distinctly dissatisfied with ourselves – and rather resentful of her... But I can say, with utter certainty, that that is *not* why that passage was written nor why it was included in our Bible. In fact, I believe it was written for an entirely opposite purpose: to help us learn a new way of responding to one another; a new and positive way of responding even to those annoying people who appear to have a perfect life that we can never attain.

In other words, it was written to encourage us to *turn* – to recognize a negative behavior in ourselves and to choose a *different* behavior: to follow the Way of Love.

Each of us has our own character and identity, qualities that were breathed into being by God’s Holy Spirit. God creates us as unique individuals to fit together and complement one another, each bringing our own gifts and treasures to the mix. And we do the greatest damage – to ourselves and to each other – when we lose sight of who God created us to be.

When the disciples lost sight of who God wanted them to be, they started to argue about which one of them was the greatest. (Mark 9:34) They started to fall into the trap of bitter envy and selfish ambition.

It’s when *we* lose sight of the person God created us to be that we fall into the trap of despising others. We resent people who appear to have greater wealth, more talent, better possessions than we do; we nurture our own bitter envy and selfish ambitions until they poison us and the people with whom we share our lives.

But there is a way to fix this. We can change the ways we respond to each other and to our own thoughts and feelings. We can turn back to Jesus Christ, we can open our ears and our hearts to the Holy Spirit’s promptings, and we can become the people God intended us to be simply by being ourselves. Our true selves.

In the Yom Kippur service, the rabbi says these words:

“This is the day of our atonement. We would return to You as penitent children long to return to a loving parent. We confess our sins on this day, knowing that the gates of repentance are always open. Receive us with compassion, and bless us with Your forgiving love.”

We do this in the Episcopal Church too, every time we say the General Confession together and receive God's absolution. And this is what it means to turn – in fact *return* is an even better description of what we're doing when choose to live more fully into the self God created. Whether we're dealing with feelings of envy, or things that tempt us, or situations that make us spiteful and judgmental, whether we're struggling with bad habits or other destructive behaviors, the first step in following the healing way of love is to turn toward the one who can work miracles – and to experience miraculous transformation in ourselves.

I invite you to read Proverbs 31 again, to try to conjure up in your mind an image of this woman. Even better, bring to mind someone you know who has skills and qualities similar to hers. When you have that image in your mind, consider those skills and attributes and consciously honor them, one after another. Make a point of appreciating that God has bestowed each of those gifts on that person for a reason, and that that person becomes the very best they can be when they use them to the glory of God.

And then – this is important – do exactly the same thing with yourself: consider, honor, and appreciate your *own* God-given gifts, and observe how much richer they become when *you* use them to glorify God. This is how God intended us to be when God created us.

When we learn to appreciate not only the things that make us unique but also those things that make others unique, we've taken the first step in the Way of Love. We turn to the one who makes us whole and separate ourselves more and more from the things that rob us of that wholeness. As the Way of Love practice teaches us, “in turning, we reorient our lives to Jesus Christ, falling in love again, again, and again.”