



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 2, Episode 2: Mutual Blessing Through Presence & Relationships

Bishop Michael Curry: This is Bishop Michael Curry and you're listening to *The Way of Love*. In this episode we're talking about the practice we call "bless" – share faith and unselfishly give and serve.

[music]

Kyle Oliver: Welcome back to *The Way of Love*, a podcast from The Episcopal Church about following Jesus and changing the world. In season two, we're talking about the Way of Love beyond the church walls. I'm Kyle Oliver, and I'm here with Sandy Milien.

Sandy Milien: Thanks, Kyle. Today we're talking about the practice "bless". To do that, we'll be joined by Greg Russinger for a conversation about a very special ministry called Laundry Love. Of course, before we dive in with Greg, we have some teaching from Bishop Curry.

Kyle: Since this season of the show is all about following Jesus in a changing world, we asked Bishop Curry how people of faith can avoid having an "us versus them" attitude toward people who are not religious or toward the "secular culture." Here's what he had to say.

Bishop Curry: If you had to distill the essence of the Christian faith, there is no doubt in my mind that you would come back to the reality of love, not as a sentimental feeling, but love as a disciplined, spiritual way of living. A way of life. The nice thing is, there actually are at least in the Greek language, at least three words for describing different nuances of love: *éros*, *phília*, *agápe*. The Greek word *éros*,

we get erotic, it's romantic love. Then *philia* is fraternal; Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. It's fraternal love, if you will. Friendship. That's what it's getting at.

Agápe is the kind of love that is service that's not self-centered, but that really is involved in doing whatever it takes to seek the good and the welfare and the well-being of others. When the New Testament, when Jesus specifically begins to talk about love, most of the time, he's talking about *agápe*, that selfless love. When the Bible says, the passage in John 3:16, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son," well, it's not talking about *éros*, and it's not really talking about *philia*, it's actually talking about *agápe*. God so loved the world, that he gave his Son.

He so loved the world, not that he took, but that he gave. So that the love that Jesus of Nazareth talks about is a giving love, a self-giving love, a selfless love, that paradoxically or miraculously, actually reveals the true self. Jesus at one point said, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever would lose his life for my sake and the Gospel, that person will find it. For what does it profit you to gain the whole world and lose your soul?" It's just clear. It's the selfless way of love. That really isn't about me. It's not about, "I'm going to get blessed. I'm going to be all right." It's not about me, it's about us. It's not about me, it's about we.

Now, you're saying, "So what's that got to do with the question you just asked?" It's got everything to do with it, because if your way of being Christian is basically the embodiment of that selfless Way of Love, there is no "us versus them". There's no them. It's us. That moves beyond judgmentalism. That moves beyond the arrogance of my religion is better than yours. That goes beyond the kind of arrogance, my opinions and ideology and thoughts are more important than yours, I'm right and you're wrong. That moves beyond all the power games. Basically, that way of love tears down all the walls of Jericho, that separate us and divide us and put anybody on top of anybody else.

The answer to the question is the Way of Love.

Sandy: Is there a moment in your life when you were especially aware of walls in your life coming down? What did it feel like to experience this sense of love and connectedness?

[music]

Kyle: We know that people of many faiths and no faith heard and were touched by Bishop Curry's royal wedding sermon. We also asked him what surprising responses he's heard, especially from people who might not hear many sermons.

Bishop Curry: I've been surprised at the consistency of the responses to the actual message. I don't think it has anything to do with me. It was a wedding and it was wonderful. It was a cool event and all that. There was that dynamic going on. There was something about the message itself, the message of the power of love, that it was almost like it was a reminder of something we knew before, but it's like the gravity of reality crushes out of us. I've had more conversations about, How do you access that?, How do you actually live that? I've had conversations about that still. This is a year later, still having conversations about that on airplanes, in airports, and traveling around.

The questions tend to be pretty real. I've had those kind of conversations consistently since then. That's been a surprise. Not that, but the fact that it was the actual message, which probably shouldn't be a surprise, but it was a surprise to me. I suspect that, one, that message of love is touching a deep

need in us. A deep need that's in us, no matter what time in which we live. Particularly in fragmented times like we are in, there's something about this love that reminds us that our origins are not just an accidental freak of nature, but that our origin and our lives are actually tied to a God who really is the source of love. That love is the source of life.

Now, I got to tell you, Michael Curry is not that good at communicating that. Only God can do that. The biggest surprise -- I've been preaching, I've been ordained since 1978 -- the biggest shock to me was that that message actually took root and I know I can't do that. I was actually surprised by God.

Sandy: So now, we're going to shift gears a little bit. Bishop Curry talked about the surprising power of the message of love and before that, he talked about how, in the Christian life, love calls us beyond the walls of an us vs. them mentality. This next conversation talks about a ministry that brings that idea to life in a powerful way, and Kyle is going to kick us off.

Kyle: Sandy and I are here with Greg Russinger, from Laundry Love. Greg, you want to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your role with the organization?

Greg Russinger: Yes. Hi, everybody. This is Greg Russinger. I am the what we call the co-founder, probably more of the founder of Laundry Love. There's reasons why we use the term co-founder. Maybe we can get into that a little bit later.

Kyle: First question. A few of our listeners may have heard of Laundry Love, but could you just describe this ministry, this movement, and tell us a bit about how it got started?

Greg: First and foremost, I'm really thankful for The Episcopal Church because I know that they have really jumped into this initiative throughout the U.S. So, we're really grateful. Laundry Love in its very simplest form is, it's a human care initiative. It's based on the premise that every human life carries tremendous dignity and worth. Laundry Love washes the clothes and bedding of low- to no-income families, children, and persons throughout the U.S.

We do so by partnering with faith communities, groups of all kinds, local laundromats, in towns, neighborhoods, cities, and occupy their spaces to go ahead and do that very mission.

Kyle: What's the story of how it got started?

Greg: Probably about 15 and a half, almost 16 years ago now, I was pastoring, I had planted a community of faith in the Ventura, California area. Very committed to our neighbors and neighboring really well, not perfected, but definitely it was a process of learning, of love, of failure, and of success. In some of that experience, we came across so many beautiful people that taught us many beautiful things about life and who they were. They, in turn, taught us about who we are. One of those particular individuals was Eric. He went by the name of T-Bone on the street.

We just asked him a very simple question. We just said, "What would it look like for us to come alongside your life in a way that would matter, be meaningful to you?" He thought about it and then he gave the response that, "If I had clean clothes, I think people would treat me as a human being." That really became the precedent and sent Laundry Love all over the U.S. That's why earlier I said I'm the co-founder, because we believe that Eric is the other co-founder. It was from his story, his

experience, his desire, and his want that really sent us to knock on the door of a local laundromat and start from there.

Sandy: This one friendship and this ministry started with just the two of you and a group of your church and it ended up being all over the country. How many partnerships do you have so far?

Greg: Probably from start to finish, over 600 locations at different points throughout those years. Approximately 1.5 to 1.6 million loads of laundry, millions of people served. Currently, we have about 350 active locations in the U.S.

Kyle: I love that language of co-founders. It seems to me what's so beautiful and authentic about this ministry is this idea of lots of folks being in a laundromat together. It got us thinking about this connection, the shift that lots of churches are making, and it sounds like churches you've served made the shift a long time ago, from an emphasis on doing things for people to doing things with people. How has that "doing with" been important for you and for this movement?

Greg: That's the million-dollar question. We hold to the value that Laundry Love is not a service project, because that can breed, not all the time, but it can breed an assumption that this is what you need or this is good news to you or whatever it might be. We have chosen to allow Laundry Love to be an expression of living *with* people. What that does, it creates a mutuality. It causes there to be a posture of listening towards the individuals or the families inside of the laundromat itself, to understand their stories through asking questions, having curiosity.

We sometimes say that we're always trying to learn and lean into how we might bear witness to love in the world. I think when you bear with-ness, that becomes the witness of love in the world. With-ness takes time, it takes intention, it's never perfected, it can get a little messy in moments, but when you're inside a laundromat, you've got nothing but time. Hopefully, then that trust becomes mutual. There's just so much more that gets expressed through the time that is allotted in that laundromat.

Sandy: There has to be some courage from the people going to the laundromat and the volunteers. Is there some kind of rubric or training for volunteers to be able to handle the situations and make people feel welcome and build that trust that you're talking about?

Greg: We are trying to always create content for any new established or any interested Laundry Love location. We're always updating that. I think even for the faith community, the person of faith, I think that listening is how we enter and listening is how we stay. From the listening, then we figure out what the good news is for the particular family or the particular individual. We just don't assume on them. I think that's a form of blessing.

I think, when I read the story of Jesus, it's in the Mark 10 passage of Bartimaeus who, as you know was blind and on the road begging, and here he's screaming out this beautiful, which is now a prayer practice maybe for some of us, many of us, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." The crowd rebukes and tells him to be quiet. Then he shouts louder. Jesus hears and says, "Call him over," and then the crowd changes to be this invitational inclusionary crowd. Then Bartimaeus he walks over to Jesus and then Jesus asked him that profound question of inviting him to be in touch with his desire and his want and his longing.

Jesus didn't assume on it. He just asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus could see that he was blind. Jesus could see that he was a beggar. Jesus could see that he was being ridiculed and pushed down. Yet Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Those type of questions that Jesus asks are examples for us, things for us to imitate as we enter into these third spaces, these laundromats. The stranger teaches us about our conditional love, our conditional grace, and our conditional mercy. Then the stranger over time becomes the acquaintance.

There's that mutuality that slowly gets built and then the acquaintance becomes a friend. Then it goes into other facets of life and experience together. I say, if we want to consider disciple as learner, you become the learner in these spaces. You become the apprentice to life, to service, to generosity, to love, and that is the gift of Laundry Love and the laundromat.

Sandy: Thanks for joining us today. This episode was produced by Kyle Oliver and me, Sandy Milien, and was edited by Kyle. Our theme and reflection music is by Ana Hernández. Jerusalem Greer writes our reflection guides, Chris Sikkema writes our shownotes. Our website is by Kaleb Heitzmann, and you can check it out at wayoflove.episcopalchurch.org. Learn more about Laundry Love at laundrylove.org.

Kyle: You can subscribe to this show wherever you get your podcasts, and we'd especially love it if you rate and review it or share it with a friend. If you'd like to contribute music, a prayer or feedback, write us at wayoflove@episcopalchurch.org.

Jane Gober: This is Jane Gober, coming to you from Pemberton, New Jersey. Merciful God, may we follow you into the world with curiosity and reverence, so that the impediment between us might be washed away, and unfurl in us your steadfast love that neighbors well. In the name of Jesus, Son of God. Amen.

Bishop Curry: The way of Jesus is the Way of Love, and the Way of Love can change the world.