



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 2, Episode 3: Learning to Meet People Where They Are

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 "Learn" – reflect on scripture each day, especially Jesus' life and teaching.

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Sandy Milien: 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 Sandy Milien and I'm here with Kyle Oliver. Hi, Kyle.

Kyle Oliver: Hey, Sandy. We've got a great episode today on the practice of "Learn". Our interview guest in the second half of the show is Patricia Lyons, who is a priest and a former school chaplain who's done a ton of work engaging young people with faith through the lens of Harry Potter and other pop culture texts.

Sandy: Before we speak to Patricia, we have an interview with Bishop Curry and our colleague, Jerusalem Greer. Jerusalem writes and teaches about evangelism and about parenting. They had a conversation about a question a lot of parents are asking themselves these days.

Bishop Curry: Welcome Jerusalem. It's good to be with you. You actually have a lot of experience helping people invite other people into a time in relationship with God and Christ. but I have to make one of the practical down-to-earth questions comes up and I hear it all the time wherever I go in the church, all the time, where a parent or parents of adult children really kind of are sad or hopeful or longing that their children, often raised in the church, if you will, might find their way into the church. Some of that longing is "this is what

we do as a family,” but some of that longing is much deeper than that, that it’s actually a sense that there’s a way to connect with God for real.

If somebody asked you about that, what do you tell them? What do you say?

Jerusalem Greer: I have gotten that question a lot, both in my work as an evangelist, but also when I did formation work. Working with youth, especially, and parents who had children who are grown or were leaving the nest and they worry about this question. The first thing that I always try to do is just remind them that everyone’s journey with God is individual and unique and that our journeys are not going to all look the same, and just as their journey, spiritual journey, probably didn’t look like their parents’ in a lot of cases. A lot of people have come to The Episcopal Church out of other denominations, for instance, and that’s probably not what their parents imagined for their children.

Bishop Curry: That’s a good point.

Jerusalem: So that everyone’s on a journey and it’s a lifetime journey so to not be discouraged that it’s not over yet, there’s still an opportunity, but the other thing I think that has to happen, and I think this probably goes to the wider issues within our church is—I talk a lot about the day of Pentecost when I talk about evangelism and that the Holy Spirit fell, not for the purpose of those within the walls, but those outside the walls.

The people within the walls were given unique languages to speak to those outside the walls and so I think the thing we probably have to get honest about, and even parents who are struggling to find ways to connect with their children, are wondering why their children are not coming back to church, it’s because maybe we’re not speaking the language of the heart that they need to hear. That’s a question I think we have to ask across the board.

Bishop Curry: Bishop Vashti McKenzie of the A.M.E. church, she said there’s a profound difference between Churchianity and Christianity. There’s Christianity that is centered on Jesus Christ and relationship with God and there’s Churchianity centered on being part of the church. I heard you kind of saying that the questions of the heart may not be answered by-

Jerusalem: Churchianity.

Bishop Curry: -Churchianity, it’s really a longing for God in the- [crosstalk] Alright. If I’m a parent and I’ve come to Christ to know Christ through Churchianity, how can I help my young adult kid find Christianity?

Jerusalem: And not just Churchianity, that’s-

Bishop Curry: Can I bug them? Can I nag them? What can I do?

Jerusalem: That works great. In my experience-

Bishop Curry: Is that a good method?

Jerusalem: -nagging your adult child works great. You know this, I know this.

[laughter]

Jerusalem: I think one of the things you have to do is you have to work backwards and you have to look at what are the things that my children, my adult children are already doing; are they listening to podcasts? What are they watching on Netflix? Where are they spending their time? Are they spending their time with their

friends? A lot of young families really look for community within their friend circles and they create new families. So, how are they spending their time? Are they eating together? Are they -- I like the English word pub better than bar -- are they at the pub?

Bishop Curry: Pub does sound better.

Jerusalem: Doesn't it sound better?

Bishop Curry: Yes, it does.

Jerusalem: Are they spending time at the pub? And then say, "Okay, where are the things that I could point them to or send them to? Is there a beer and hymns in their area or pub theology? Is there a podcast that I think they would like, maybe like this one." That I could just say, "Hey, I found this." You have to be passive with your kids and be like, "You might not like it, but I'm just going to say it."

Bishop Curry: I'll pass it, anyway.

Jerusalem: You never know. Then the other thing is maybe look in their area; are there churches that are speaking the language that they would understand? In our community, small groups has become a language that we speak that helps connect people to faith. Young people who have left the church will come back because they love sharing a meal, they love sharing community, they love sharing stories.

They're able to do that in homes for small groups in ways that they still don't feel safe doing inside a church or are even interested in doing in a church because it's still too full of baggage or it seems rote to them or it's their parents' thing, but there are these other things that they will come to and they make their way back backwards.

Bishop Curry: Backwards? Yes.

Sandy: What's a way you've tried to meet someone where they are when talking about your life and your faith?

[music]

Bishop Curry: If I was a parent of a young adult and I really wanted my child back in church, and yet I knew I wanted them to have more than just being back in church, could I tell them that?

Jerusalem: Yes. You know our Baptismal Covenant and our promises we make?

Bishop Curry: Yes.

Jerusalem: There's one that says that we will proclaim the good news in word and deed.

Bishop Curry: Word, too

Jerusalem: Word, too. Episcopalians, we're great on "deed".

Bishop Curry: We can do "deed," yes.

Jerusalem: We've been a little shy about "word" and the time has come. What's the St. Francis quote that everybody likes to say? Preach the gospel as always, use words when necessary. What I like to say is it's now necessary.

Bishop Curry: It's necessary, yes.

Jerusalem: Nuance is over.

Bishop Curry: You got it.

Jerusalem: We live in a culture of words; there are text words, there are video words, there are tweet words, there are Facebook words, there are Snapchat words. We are in a word era and now it's our turn to be brave and bold and not assume that everyone can tell that what we're doing is because of Jesus, and everyone wants to be wanted. Everyone wants to be invited. Everyone even wants the chance to say, "No, thank you." Ask your kid. Just ask your kid.

Bishop Curry: Yes, just have the conversation.

Jerusalem: Just have the conversation and tell them why it matters.

Bishop Curry: You know the great irony is most of us who are parents, the most awkward conversations we ever had with our kids were about sex. Sex is a piece of cake. Today, it's faith.

Jerusalem: It's faith, you're right.

Bishop Curry: We talk about my faith and in those moments when it's right, not inappropriately, not hassling them, but every once in a while, sometimes they may be asking you. If they ask, tell them what's in you.

Jerusalem: Share your story. Share why faith matters to you. They might just think it's a habit or something you do to be a good person. No. Share why Jesus matters, why your faith matters.

Bishop Curry: Jerusalem, your mama named you right.

Jerusalem: Thank you.

Bishop Curry: It's a privilege and a blessing to be with you.

Jerusalem: Thank you, Bishop.

Bishop Curry: Thank you.

[music]

Kyle: Our second segment is basically a deep dive into that idea of learning to speak the languages of the people we care about. People we might want to share our faith with, and who also inevitably teach us about the way of Jesus. Here's Sandy to introduce our guests.

Sandy: Today, our guest is Patricia Lyons. Welcome to the Way of Love podcast, Patricia. Can you tell us who you are so our listeners know all the amazing things you do?

Patricia Lyons: Like you said, my name is Patricia Lyons. I live and serve at Virginia Theological Seminary with evangelism initiatives. For about 20 years, I was a lay chaplain at an Episcopal high school as a day job, and that's the work that got me into thinking about culture and how the church can speak to communities of people outside the church because most of the teenagers I worked with would describe themselves as outside the church.

I sort of wished that everyone in the church had to spend a couple of months or a year standing in front of a group of teenagers talking about faith, what you learn about yourself and about God and about the world to see how innately spiritual everyone is, and certainly teenagers, how creative and imaginative they are. Rather than being jaded and angsty or whatever we think about teenagers and religion. I just find them to be some of the most hungry people who are authentic and acting out that hunger, and they're not anti-church that they feel the church is anti-them in some ways, or that institutions are just speaking a foreign language, so they're happy to go elsewhere.

Sandy: Was trying to speak their language and meet them where they are, was that what drew you to using something in pop culture like Harry Potter, for example?

Patricia: Yes, that's actually a great story. While I was a chaplain in a high school, it was going to be a homecoming week. Just a few years ago, actually. I missed the whole Harry Potter phenomenon when it happened and then I heard that that year the theme was going to be Harry Potter and I thought, "This is a nightmare. These Harry Potter people need to drop this." The books are done, the movies are done. This is a disaster, but you probably both can imagine this and anyone listening to this podcast. I walked into school that Monday of homecoming week and they had decorated the whole building to be Hogwarts.

9th graders, 12th graders, black, white, kids who are on scholarship, athletes, people were talking to each other, who never talked to each other, teachers who nobody even liked were even nice that week. More people came to pick up quidditch, which I couldn't even spell, on Thursday for an optional quidditch thing at lunch than came to the mandatory pep rally, and the dance was a ball. I had never seen so much fabric with teenagers. They were in groups from their houses, not just with dates. I called my mother, who had been a teacher for 50 years and just declared that night, I said, "Mom, Harry Potter took on homecoming and won."

I had never seen such universal or near-universal embracing of a narrative of meaning. Kids were literally grieving the next week that it wasn't Harry Potter week anymore. There are languages, and that one in particular, that are so powerful and so spiritual and they're not morally neutral. They are good. They are about beauty, friendship, wholeness, and courage. That night after homecoming, the next day I watched all eight films, sort of a self-imposed marathon, read the books straight through because I knew I'd missed a language of faith, commitment, and identity, and I wanted to catch up, and I've learned to talk about resurrection and the resurrection stone.

I've learned to talk about faith and Harry's wand breaking and having him carry the pieces around his neck for the entire series. Hope beyond hope that somehow something broken could be healed as it is in the books. In the end, that the wand that was broken, that he carried with him over his heart is put back together. We'd need a hundred podcasts to come up with all of the intentional themes written into the story by an Anglican, J. K. Rowling, who chose her own baptism when she was 11. She picked the church at 11 years old and it's clear when you read her story that she's on a mission and at the end of it she admitted she was. That it wasn't Narnia, she didn't want to be that one-to-one, but that she did say that there really is one great story of love and redemption that we find in God and Jesus Christ and she decided to tell it.

Kyle: Tricia, it's tempting to come to this conversation with this kind of metaphor of the cultural artifact, in this case, the sort of grand narrative of Harry Potter. Thinking of it as like a lens. I think in the way I'm hearing you talk about this, that's not the metaphor you're using. I wonder if you might sort of think about kind of the relationship between the "pop culture content" and the "faith content."

Patricia: We take too seriously that the distinction between church and world or that there's a public square that is somehow secular and there's a church that is somehow religious or holy and so we have culture, pop culture, and we talk about that as a space distinct from church. There's no public square in the first chapters of Genesis. There's no place where the Spirit of God isn't breathing and moving.

If your question is, how do we help people communicate that God can be found and known and one can grow in your faith in and through pop culture, I'm a little uncomfortable with that because I feel like we're already ceding a part of human life that is somehow waiting for God to arrive or waiting for God to be brought to it, I think we need to start having a more Anglican expectation, which is that we will find the Gospel in these stories.

Sandy: One of the practices I think we can relate to this is the practice of "Learn". I'm just wondering how biblical do you get, have you gotten, can you get?

Patricia: Wanting to be able to communicate with other people fluently in their cultural framework something like Harry Potter or Star Wars or whatever, means you have to spend a lot of time. I read a lot of Harry Potter just to know more about these characters. Because then you meet a teenager that says, the person that kept them from being a cutter and taking their own life is Luna Lovegood. Now all of a sudden, I got to say, "I want to know everything about Luna Lovegood." What are you saying to me when you say that? Like the Wycliffe Bible translators in past centuries, they would go off to faraway lands and in order to just to translate the Bible into that language, they would live among those people.

Sometimes we didn't even have a written language for decades. I think of myself as like a Wycliffe Bible translator and I know that was a problematic era. That was a colonial religion for sure, but that idea though, that you would go live with people for 30 years so that you could tell them the first chapter of John in their own words and images. It's hard work to do that. So for "Learn", for me, it means I have to know the scriptures better and better. I have to know the language in which the people are living and where the stakes are high for them. Harry Potter, by the way, is pretty easy because there are two Bible verses in the Harry Potter books. So that's a nice way to be using the practice of "Learn" with students.

The first question you could ask people is, "Did you notice that there's two Bible verses in the last book written on graves?" On Dumbledore's grave is the verse, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," which is a great description of Dumbledore and a great description of being a seeker. And then on James and Lily Potter's grave from Corinthians, "The last enemy to be defeated is death." J. K. Rowling said that she picked those two verses because they summed up for her the whole of the Christian faith, that we're all seekers, so seek a treasure that will form you into a person of goodness and remember that as you seek, that death was an enemy and it has been defeated.

That's what frees you to be a seeker. She literally just summed up for her the faith in two verses.

Kyle: Rather than a lens, it's more of an interface between these two intermixed worlds.

Patricia: I think the Christian has to think that "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" and we need to look often when we get up in the morning at our room that we're waking up in and the floor or dorm or cell or base or home that we live in and look around and just say, "God is calling, God is present." Because people said to Jesus, "Where's the Kingdom?" Jesus said, "Some of you say it's over there and some of you say it's over here, but I say the Kingdom of God is within you." We have the Baptismal Covenant saying that we will seek and serve the Christ in all people.

I think it's important to remember the reason we take a vow to that is because Christ is in all people. That's why we're vowing to not miss it. We're not vowing to put Christ in all people. That would be a different baptismal covenant. We behave that way, badly, about evangelism for centuries, but we are actually not swearing to put Christ everywhere, we're swearing to recognize Christ everywhere.

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

Sandy: 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 with a friend. If you'd like to contribute music, a prayer or feedback, write us at wayoflove@episcopalchurch.org.

Margaret: This is Margaret from Bradford, New Hampshire. God from whom all wisdom flows, quiet the noises of our everyday life that we may hear your Word. Grow in us a curiosity to know Jesus' life and teachings so deeply that they become the first language of our hearts. As we go out each day to school and work, help us to listen to one another, to share our stories, and to see and name the wonderful ways in which the Gospel is alive in the world. Amen.

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