



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 2, Episode 5: Worshipping in Public as Witness

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 "Worship" – Gather in community weekly to thank, praise and draw near to God.

[music]

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.

Kyle Oliver: Thanks, Sandy. Today we're talking about what might seem like the most challenging practice to engage in outside of church: worship. In the second half of our show, we'll be talking with Hugo Olaiz about a celebration that quite naturally takes place in neighborhood settings.

Sandy: Of course, Bishop Curry is no stranger to leading and participating in more public and community-based services of worship. We started by talking about what it's like to prepare for that experience.

Bishop Curry: Well, context is everything so that in an outside setting, you've got to be mindful of what can people actually hear and how much can they hear. What are the distractions around you that may actually be taking their attention away or what they can actually retain? One of the things I learned as a parish priest years ago was that there's a whole lot going on during a service. You

probably only have maybe a third of people's actual attention because if there's a little baby in the pew in front of them or in the chair nearby, I can assure you the baby is going to trump the preacher any day of the week.

Then, there're parents with kids and so they're focusing half on the kids and half-listening to the sermon. Then, you have somebody who's preoccupied with something that they came in and you know what? All of that is okay, to bring that into the awareness of the presence of God. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three gather together in my name, there I am in the midst of them," which means just dwell in his presence. It's okay if you're worried about something. My grandma used to sing this song, "Take it to the Lord and leave it there. Take it to the Lord and leave it there."

Sandy: Does knowing the audience or not knowing where you're going to be, the context, does it change the way you prepare to lead worship?

Bishop Curry: You want to be respectful of the people who are there. As much as you can know about the context, it really does help. It makes a big difference, on one hand. On another hand, it doesn't. The message is the same, the gospel is the same. It's like it says in Hebrews, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever." How you convey it, how you communicate it, that does get affected, if you will, by the context. I'll never forget, I was rector at St. James' Church in Baltimore and this is probably 30 years ago now. We were working together between the African-American and the Korean-American communities there. There had been some tensions between the two communities who lived in some of the same areas and there were some tensions.

A number of clergy, Korean and African-American, got together and we spent time getting to know each other. At some point, we decided to have a public service of worship and they decided I was going to be the preacher. I was preaching and everything I said was being interpreted or translated into Korean. It was just fascinating because, one, Korean is a little bit of a longer language when you translate it. It takes more words to actually get it out, but two, I knew I was swimming in different cultural waters. I don't remember what it was I said, but whatever it was, it wasn't funny in English, but it was hilarious in Korean. You want to be mindful of the culture, the context, whatever that happens to be.

Sandy: Have you had a special experience where you weren't prepared or something didn't go the way you thought it was going to be, but then the Spirit just moved through you and it just went great?

Bishop Curry: That happens a lot. I mean, it really does. Something that you think when you're preparing is going to communicate one way, sometimes communicates another way, and I've just learned, "Go with the Spirit." It's just clear, if that's where the Spirit is gone, follow that.

Sandy: Don't mess with the Spirit.

Bishop Curry: Don't mess with the Spirit. That's right. I do that all the time, all I get all about the scrimmage line.

Sandy: I know you share time with people from different faith backgrounds. What's it like to be a Christian and experience worship in another faith tradition?

Bishop Curry: In another faith tradition?

Sandy: Yes.

Bishop Curry: I've been blessed to be able to actually worship in other traditions, usually on occasions where we're coming together across traditional lines. Not just among Christians, but Christians and Jews or Christians and Muslims, Christians and Hindus. There is an experience, generally, of the Sacred, of the reality of the mystery of God that does come through in other traditions, even for someone like me who isn't of that tradition. It's like there's a gospel hymn, "I can feel this presence every while."

There's times where I felt the presence in another tradition and there's a part of me that says, "That's the same presence." Every once in a while I can feel when I take the bread, this is my body, and drink of the cup, this is my blood. Every once in a while. Doesn't happen all the time, but there are times when you feel there is something more here than just wheat bread and sweet wine. I've been in other religious settings where, as Jacob said, "Surely the Lord is in this place."

I remember one time I was in a synagogue and there is a point in the service where the ark which holds the sacred scrolls which have the words of Holy Scripture on them. The choir was singing and I don't know what they were singing. It was in Hebrew and yet it was clearly invoking the presence of God. The ark opened and I remember a shiver going down my spine when they were singing, they were hitting some notes. The ark opened and the rabbi took the scroll and put it on his shoulder and walked. I just wanted to say, I knew I was in a synagogue, but I wanted to say, "Thank you, Jesus. Glory, hallelujah."

Sandy: That says a lot. You don't necessarily have to understand the context where you are as long as your heart is open.

Bishop Curry: We can learn to respect each other's traditions of faith and ways of God. That doesn't mean you give up your own. It doesn't even mean you compromise it. The depth of your faith, at least for me as a Christian, the depth of my faith leads me to respect and honor wherever God shows up. Jesus actually said, "He who is not against us is for us." That's Jesus talking. So, if Jesus said that, who am I to deny that?

Kyle: Have you ever participated in a worship service in a setting that took you out of your comfort zone? How did the experience connect you with a new insight?

[music]

Kyle: Now that we've heard a little bit from Bishop Curry about some of his experiences with worship beyond the church walls, we've got a special guest here to talk about a particular tradition of doing that. Hugo Olaiz, can you introduce yourself?

Hugo Olaiz: Sure. My name is Hugo Olaiz. I'm an associate editor of Latino-Hispanic resources for Forward Movement.

Sandy: Well, welcome Hugo. To get started, can you tell us a little bit about the tradition of las Posadas? For the listeners who don't speak Spanish, can you tell us about what the word means? How the celebration works, maybe some details specific to this type of celebration?

Hugo: The word *posadas* itself means something along the lines of inn, lodging or shelter and basically the posadas are an Advent celebration. They involve the procession and they come from Latin America. Basically, from Mexico, some parts of Central America, Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador. It starts on December 16th and it lasts till December the 24th. This is based on the story told in Chapter 2 of Luke, Joseph and Mary are basically rejected by the innkeeper. There's no room for them in the inn, the story says. They end up in a manger. The reenactment of the posadas, basically, reenacts that part, but then there's a twist at the end. The last innkeeper of all the innkeepers who receive the pilgrims ends up recognizing Joseph and Mary and inviting them in.

Sandy: You said this is a reenactment. I'm interested to hear more about the different roles people play, maybe the different parts of the Posada. What makes this special?

Hugo: The one thing that you need to do is a song. This is a song that has a part sung by the pilgrims, as they are called, from outside the house. Another part of the song is sung from inside the house. The ones who sing from the inside are considered basically the innkeepers. You need that.

Kyle: We've got a recording of the song. I believe this is you singing in this recording, right?

Hugo: I think I asked my husband John Charles to play the guitar, I don't play the guitar myself. It's the two of us singing the song of the Posadas.

[singing]

Hugo: That song is repeated. So, if you go to a neighborhood in Mexico for example, the neighbors get together and they say, "Okay, the pilgrims are going to visit this, this and this house." It could be three houses, it could be five houses, I don't know how many. The important thing is to decide who the last neighbor visited is going to be, because that family is in charge of not only opening the doors, which involves singing the last verse that was not sung in the other houses, but also preparing the dinner.

Kyle: What got you interested in this tradition?

Hugo: I should make complete disclosure here. I was born in Argentina. I did not experience Posadas growing up. It was in the United States that I experienced my first Posada. At the time I was worshipping with a small Latino congregation in Salt Lake City. Later on, we moved to North Carolina. I believe over 10% of the population of North Carolina are Latinos. We decided that we were going to reconnect with some of these traditions. One of the things that we did is to participate in Posadas organized by the neighbors themselves. We were there just to participate with them and to play the guitar, because they didn't have any musicians in the group. I experienced Posadas surrounded by Mexicans in this town, in the middle of North Carolina.

[laughter]

Sandy: Hugo, you've written a little bit about whether it's appropriate for non-Latin American or Latino families or churches that may not have many members that speak Spanish or of that community, if it's appropriate for them to organize Posadas. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Hugo: I strongly recommend every Episcopal congregation in the United States or every Christian congregation in the United States to explore the possibility of holding or celebrating Posadas. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. This is a cultural tradition and it has many, many different forms. This is a wonderful opportunity to meet your Latino neighbors. If you belong to an Anglo congregation, you can go to any Latino person, particularly if it's someone coming from Mexico, and say, "Hey, we're thinking of celebrating Posadas in my church. Do you think you could help us? What advice would you give us? What to do, what not to do?"

Then, of course, invite them. I remember that when we started to celebrate Posadas in our congregation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, we invited our barber. His name was Luis. He was from, I think, San Miguel in Mexico. He came and after the celebration, he came to us, he told us all these things that we had done wrong [laughs]. You know what, it is fine, it is perfectly fine. He was a good friend.

Kyle: What kind of opportunities pop up when you're out worshiping and reenacting and singing in the neighborhood and not just in your church?

Hugo: The most wonderful experience happened to me last Christmas, because it was the first time that I was in Mexico. I have a friend there and his name is Arturo Eduardo Carrasco Gomez, a very active Anglican priest in the city of Mexico. We were at what is called Abrigo Tochan. This is a shelter that receives migrants who are traveling across Mexico. Some of them may try to reach the southern border of the U.S., but the ones that I met there were really trying to stay in Mexico. People escaping horrible situations in countries like Honduras and Guatemala.

We celebrated this Posadas in the street, outside this shelter for migrants. As we were walking, as we were singing the song and walking towards the shelter, these kids, and they were so wonderful, they started to spontaneously join us. What I'm trying to say is that for many Latinos, this is a public experience.

Kyle: Hugo, is there anything else you want to say about that thematic connection?

Hugo: I'm almost crying as I remember the message of the Posadas and the struggles that these folks coming from Honduras and Guatemala had before arriving to Mexico City. The way in which this shelter opened the doors to these migrants, it was so profoundly moving to see the whole community invited, the symbol was not lost. The Posadas perhaps have the message that could save us. A reminder of the teachings of Jesus. A reminder about what it means to follow Jesus, what it means to open our doors and receive a stranger.

[music]

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 are by Ana Hernández, Jerusalem Greer writes our reflection guide, Chris Sikkema writes our shownotes. Our website is by Kaleb Heitzman, and you can check it out at wayoflove.episcopalchurch.org. You can download Hugo's Las Posadas resources in English and Spanish at venadelante.org/posadas. You can find that link on our shownotes.

Kyle: You can subscribe to this show wherever you get your podcast 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.

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