



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 2, Episode 6: Going into the Neighborhood to Listen Deeply

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 "Go" – Cross boundaries, listen deeply, and live like Jesus.

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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.

Kyle Oliver: Thanks, Sandy. We're talking about Go today, and our guest is Katie Nakamura Rengers. Katie is the vicar and director of The Abbey, a creative new ministry in Birmingham, Alabama. We had a great conversation about hospitality and ministry in our neighborhoods.

Sandy: Yes, but first we'll hear from Bishop Curry. This is from a conversation we had about his own experience with this topic. Bishop Curry, you travel all over the world in your role as Presiding Bishop, and including places that might be culturally unfamiliar to you. What's it like to be the recipient of hospitality in so many different contexts?

Bishop Curry: I think it's wonderful that you have seen that going, is actually to go into the world, if you will, as a presence, as an instrument of God's hospitality, which is for us to both give and to receive, to both show hospitality and to graciously receive hospitality. I have to admit that sometimes

it's more difficult to receive the hospitality than it is to give it. Now, part of that, I think has to do with sort of dynamics of being in control, I think, I suspect. Some of it is just an awkwardness. If we're programmed to give, you have to learn how to receive. Both are necessary.

To go, without it, runs the risk of Go becoming an imperialistic command. That's the opposite of what it is. When Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, in the end, Matthew 28, where it says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," that is not an imperialistic command. That is an invitation to hospitality. Sometimes you find yourself in context and situations where receiving hospitality is difficult because you have to become vulnerable, and you have to risk on some levels, and you have to trust that the person who's giving it knows what they're doing, or at least they're doing the best that they can.

I remember, some years ago, I was going somewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, and I can't remember which country it was, but wherever I was going, I remember my wife was saying to me, "Where are you staying?" She was asking me details. I said, "I really don't know." She said, "You're traveling all the way from North Carolina to Sub-Saharan Africa, and you don't know where you're staying?" I said, and this is really true, I said, "One thing I've learned traveling around is that, with church folk, showing hospitality to a visitor or a guest is a sacred, cardinal virtue. Nobody's going to let anything happen to a guest."

Especially around the world, hospitality to a guest is sacred. We have a little bit of that in America, but not as much. It's not as big a virtue. We don't think of it as a virtue. We think of it as good etiquette, when in fact, it's a moral virtue in much of the rest of the world. I've learned to trust that. You have to be wise and pay attention to what's going on, but to trust that and to live in it. I've been in contexts and situations where the government was questionable, where security wasn't all that secure from the formal structures, and I've learned to trust and rely on church folk who live there, who know what they're doing, and put my life in their hands.

That's powerful hospitality, vulnerability too. Now imagine, translate that into your daily life, that if you're an agent, an instrument of God's hospitality, to give and receive. That changes the nature of interactions in daily life. For example, there are times when I'd rather not travel in a clerical collar on an airplane because I may not get rest. I may be working, and yet most of the time I do it. Because I realized, you know something, that's part of what I'm supposed to do. If I get in a conversation about something deep and religious or personal, that's what I'm supposed to do.

When we leave the doors of our homes, leave the doors of church, we're sent out into the world to share the hospitality of God, who said, "Let there be light," and made room for the light, and to receive the hospitality that God has put in the world from the hands and hearts of others. That's a very different way of being. That changes how we live with each other. It changes how we care for the creation itself. It changes our politics. It changes the policies of our countries. It changes how we do business. To go and share hospitality and receive hospitality is actually to go and to love practically.

Sandy: Treating hospitality as a virtue, not just something we do to be polite, can help us grow in our relationship with God and others. Has giving or receiving hospitality ever felt like a sacred act? What did that experience teach you about generosity and community?

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How can we be encouraged as Christians to continue that when we go to places where we don't feel comfortable, where we're not treated well, where we are singled out, where things don't go as planned?

Bishop Curry: I was in a country, I won't say where it was, it was a deeply impoverished community where we were, and we were visiting. We went to one particular home where there was a very frail older woman. She said, "Would you like something to drink?" My first response, "Oh, no, thank you." She said, "Oh, please, would you?" Then I realized no, no, no. She was giving us something. She brought, I don't know if it was Pepsi Cola or something in a glass that it wasn't clean.

I didn't want to hurt this woman's feelings because she was offering me the hospitality that she had, and I had to just suck it up and drink it. It was the right thing to do. I'd do it again. It was Pepsi Cola. It wasn't water. Even if it had been water, I think I would have just drank the water, or at least sipped. Sometimes you get humbled deeply because sometimes people are giving you everything they've got.

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Kyle: Now, to continue our exploration of hospitality and the practice Go, let's throw it to Sandy to introduce our guest.

Sandy: Today we have a very special guest with us, Katie Nakamura Rengers. Katie, can you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about who you are and your ministry in the church?

Katie Nakamura Rengers: Sure. I am located in Birmingham, Alabama, where I was asked by our bishop to start a church without walls in the Avondale neighborhood, which is a changing, very complex, complicated neighborhood with a lot of poor folks and gentrification, all in one. The model we selected five or six years ago was to start a coffee shop ministry. The Abbey is a hospitality and coffee center right now and a worshipping community, and I'm the priest-in-charge.

Sandy: Great. Can you tell us a little bit about the process of how it started and maybe how was it going into that community and not being sure if it was going to work or not, or if it did work or all that?

Katie: I think we should have been more terrified than we were. [chuckling] This neighborhood, I was actually born in this neighborhood and lived here till I was in late elementary school. There were no businesses on the street. Then about 10 years ago, maybe even less, the Avondale Brewery opened up, and then a restaurant called Post Office Pies, and the neighborhood started being revitalized by younger professionals who were moving in.

Our bishop helped identify it as just an area of growth and change, and one where we had not had an Episcopal presence before. We just started to ask the question of how do we be vulnerable? How do we be authentic? How do we keep the doors of the church open Monday through Friday so that we don't run into this situation that most of our traditional parishes have of, if you're not there on Sunday morning and Wednesday night, you've missed it, you missed the whole thing?

The Abbey certainly seems to attract people for whom food is their love language. It means so much more than just cooking for someone. The sharing of food and the sharing of the chores – I walked in this morning and a homeless man named DJ was helping Gustavo, our business manager, wash dishes.

It just makes me feel like there's people here because there's a front door and there's a back door and people are constantly invited to walk in and out. They claim the space as their own and care about whether the dishes are dirty, or the filters are changed or the restrooms are clean.

Sandy: I've never been in a space like that, I've never been in a community like that where it's faith-based but it's also geared to not feel like church, but also feed our souls through the word or through worship. What should I expect when I walk in?

Katie: Actually, in the last three months or so, we've changed our model a little bit. What you can expect has changed. When we first started out and for the last four years, you could expect to walk into a space that's a fully functioning coffee shop with menus that look a lot like, maybe not like Starbucks, but like any neighborhood coffee shop, food, drinks, but you would notice instantly. It was really important to us that you would know instantly that you're in a churchy space. Because, I don't know, I just think it's creepy if you don't realize that and then you only find out later, you feel manipulated. If you walk in our back door and you look immediately to the right, there's a small group meeting area also known as the St. Francis Chapel. There's an icon wall of about a dozen of our favorite saints in gold frames.

If you walk in the front door, that's our worship space. I mean, sitting space as well, but worship space, big cross on the wall, altar consistently set up. Sometimes with icons on it, sometimes with a sign with some poem or words from the Book of Common Prayer on it that says something about the liturgical season. In our Birmingham context, you would know that you're in some kind of liturgical, catholic space, not a Southern Baptist space. Love Southern Baptists, but they just have a different decorating style. [laughter] In the last three months, the difference is that we've moved to a donation-based system. We're no longer selling coffee and food, we are doing a much simpler menu and not charging.

Kyle: Katie are you able to say a little more about that transition?

Katie: It's something we'd considered for a long time. I read an article recently that named something I had been noticing for a while, talking about the dark side of the food service industry. This author compared it to the Church and Martin Luther King I believe it was, who said something about how Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. Then the author of this contemporary article was talking about how restaurants are some of the most segregated places of American life.

The reason that struck me was because The Abbey has really tried to be authentically diverse. I was like, why is this so hard? Reading this article, I'm like, "Oh, because we're a church and we're a restaurant." The other piece, we finally came to terms with the fact that The Abbey is never going to financially be able to sustain a full-time priest-in-charge, so it's now open morning through early afternoon and on that donation basis. This is a hard model to uphold and to manage if you don't have a full-time clergy person managing the manager, managing the employees, making sure that everything is flowing and working under the standards of the Kingdom of God and The Episcopal Church.

Sandy: How can we encourage people, Christians, to get out of their comfort zones?

Katie: Jesus models this kind of engagement - I'm thinking about the woman at the well that he just strikes up a conversation with in the Book of John. How do we do that? Why don't you just compliment somebody's earrings, or someone's shoes, to get that conversation started?

And then I'll start to just throw in some of the more awkward questions. Do you have family you're going to celebrate Thanksgiving with? Where do you work? Gosh, is that hard? Our American culture is so shy about engaging with other people, especially with strangers. If we can just model the ways of doing that, a place like The Abbey can then be a witness to the rest of the community. We quickly became identified as a center of safe space, for people who are just a little bit different but still want healthy community. All of that is just such a blessing and it's so reflective of the Kingdom of God when you look around this place. It's also incredibly challenging.

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

Learn more about The Abbey on their Facebook page at facebook.com/theabbeybham.

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.

Larisa Shaterian: This is Larisa Shaterian of Oakland, California. O God, in Jesus, you took a risk and told us that, yes, you want to eat what we eat and drink what we drink, and in doing so, you welcome us again and again into the Kingdom of Heaven. Help us to see your neon welcome sign that flashes and dances for eternity. Bless us now to give and to receive with clearer hearts and softer eyes, so that the Kingdom of Heaven may be here and now. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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