




THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 1, Episode 2: Pray – Spending time with God

Bishop Michael Curry: This is Bishop Michael Curry. You're listening to *The Way of Love*. In this episode, we're talking about the practice we call "Pray" – dwell intentionally with God each day.

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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. I'm Sandy Milien and I'm here with Kyle Oliver. Kyle, so what is the topic for today's episode?

Kyle Oliver: Yes, Sandy. Just to remind everybody, so we start getting these in our head. The seven way of love practices are turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest. Today, we are talking about that third one in the list: pray.

Sandy: Yes, and today we've got a special treat for you all, because in our interview with Bishop Curry, he told an interesting story about an online spiritual experience and we were able to track down the person he shared that experience with.

Kyle: That's right. we're going to be talking to Katie Churchwell, who is a priest in Florida who's been putting a new digital spin on prayer. She also happens to be an old friend of mine, so I'm especially excited.

Sandy: Well, before we do that, we asked Bishop Curry to tell us a little bit about his own prayer life – and just a heads-up about terminology: he's going to mention various prayer services of the church, sometimes called offices. Just so you know, "compline" is the office for before bed, and it happens to be one of my favorites.

Bishop Curry: My prayer life, I have to admit it's a mix. I read the morning and evening prayer daily. What actually, what I do is morning and either evening prayer or compline, it depends on my day. Like the day we're

taping this right now, it's the time when I would be doing evening prayer, so I know I'll do compline later on. But I do two offices a day and so, and that's good and the nice thing about that is, there are times when it does force me to read parts of the Bible that I wouldn't gravitate to automatically. There are parts that I do gravitate to more naturally, and so it forces me to listen to things that I might not listen to. That's a good thing, and that's a good routine and practice that puts me in a place of paying attention to God. It really does.

With that though, what I've started doing some years ago now is an extended prayer time over Scripture, whatever the passage happened to be. Sometimes, I use the Scripture that's assigned that day, but sometimes, like in some seasons, I'll be reading - I'm reading Hebrews right now, actually. I'll be doing Hebrews. I'll just read a section of that and listen, a sort of a modified form of centering prayer, zeroed down on what was the word, what words stood out and then just sit with that word for a while and let whatever comes, come, and then come out of that and then finish the rest of the office.

I do that and then on other days, sometimes it's the same days but on other days, I'll take my prayer list. I usually, again, I do this in the morning. I do my extended prayer time in the morning and I keep a prayer list on my iPhone and sometimes I just pray for people by name and whatever it was specifically they asked, or if there was something specific we're praying about. Other times I'll go through the list and I try to remember the, see the person's face or see them, and it's almost like trying to imagine what it would be like for God to see them.

I know I can't, but that is turned into a meditation time, that I never, I stumbled into that accidentally just with my prayer list. Those two things have moved me more in the direction of meditation, which means it takes more time, but that's okay. That's why I do it in the morning before stuff gets going.

Kyle: In both of those, it sounds like you're inviting yourself to focus on details, details in the Scripture and details of what this person looks like. What do you think that does for you as a prayer?

Bishop Curry: It brings them to, and the Scripture, but it brings it to more, to fuller consciousness. There's an awareness. It slows me down enough to pay attention to them and not just check off the box.

[music]

Sandy: Take a minute to reflect on some ways you spend time with God. Is there a time of day that works well for you? How might you slow down enough to listen to what's happening in your life or in the world?

[music]

Kyle: Has it changed for you when circumstances of your life have changed?

Bishop Curry: Yes and no. I can tell you what's interesting, this, when I had prostate surgery this summer past, when you're coming out of anesthesia, you're not very—you depend on the prayer of other people. If you pray, it could be very Ezekiel-like, with apocalyptic and strange and weird dreams. Once I got home, and was still on some medication but I wasn't fully reading, I would try to read and then nod off and so that didn't work. I went on Facebook and there's a young priest, in Florida has Pop-up Prayer.

Kyle: Katie Churchwell?

Bishop Curry: Katie Churchwell, yes. I stumbled onto her and so I started listening to her and she became my evening prayer. I would just, and it was wonderful because she would talk about prayer and talk about things, and I said, "Okay, this is my—this is evening prayer." For that, for a period of time, Pop-up Prayer was my evening prayer because she could do what I couldn't do.

Kyle: How do you know when it's time to make a change? I'm just really curious about what that process looks like of how these practices evolve in us?

Bishop Curry: Part of it, I know for me and in conversations I've had over the years with spiritual directors, that there's something okay about routine being routine, but there's something un-okay about routine becoming routine and becoming routinized and when the routine has no meaning, and there is a point at which you know that, and I don't want to, and I try not to be too hasty with that – I've had spiritual directors say, "Don't rush to that decision, because the boredom may be something important for you at that moment. Live in there, it's okay. Everything doesn't have to be stimulating. Everything doesn't have to be exciting, sometimes that's okay, but there is a point where you begin to realize, "Okay, I'm not being fed and this has been going on for a period of time. Maybe I need to change it up a little. It doesn't have to be a big thing, something."

That's why having a spiritual director or spiritual companion – somebody you talk to about your prayer life and that life, about the inner life – is helpful because at least for me, for extroverts I think out loud, so I'll talk about this or talking to somebody else actually helps me to think out loud, and then they're going to hear something that I'm not going to hear. Then so you make, I don't want to resort to a football, but calling an audible at the line of scrimmage. You kinda change it up there. And just a little, it doesn't have to be a big change necessarily.

[music]

Sandy: We're back, and as we mentioned in the beginning of the show, we were curious to hear more about Katie Churchwell's Pop-up Prayer project, so we've got her here online with us. Welcome to the *Way of Love*, Katie!

Katie Churchwell: Hey, thanks for having me.

Sandy: To begin, can you tell us a little bit about what Pop-up Prayer is and how the project got started?

Katie: It happened, I can't say by accident, but it happened by force of nature. In the summer of 2017, Florida, where I live in Florida in Saint Petersburg, the whole west coast of Florida was preparing for Hurricane Irma. People were anxious and were, well, freaking out. I was right there along with them. I'm from Arizona and we don't get hurricanes in landlocked states.

This was my first hurricane and when the hurricane started to get closer, we, for safety reasons, shut down the church, just like everywhere else in the city shut down and I realized that that actually didn't make anxiety go away. Like my anxiety did not shut down, my need for community and for comfort did not shut down. I took a leaf out of the book from my friends in Houston, who modeled what you do during a hurricane, and you get to where people can be, which when buildings are closed and you're not allowed to be out on the streets, that's going to be on Facebook.

I started doing devotions in the morning and in the evening, 8:00 AM and 8:00 PM, which worked really well when I literally had nothing else to do other than sit around and wonder if this was when the roof was going to blow off. We got really lucky in St. Pete and when the hurricane was over and I thought, "Oh, that's it," and I was wrong. I stopped doing it for a while, actually but I kept getting these messages from people saying, "I just went and bought a *Book of Common Prayer* for me to use while I'm at work and you come on Pop-up Prayer," or, "What time are you going to be coming on tonight?"

I realized that it had become something for people that I hadn't anticipated. It became a discernment process for me about what I could actually do logistically. I work fulltime, I have two small kids. As I started to ponder

about what people were asking me to do, and could we keep doing these devotions on Facebook, I realized that the 8:00 AM, 8:00 PM model wasn't going to work for me. Honestly, anyone who has kids in their house will tell you that 8:00 AM and 8:00 PM are the worst times to do anything.

Kyle: We should be praying for you at 8:00 AM and 8:00 PM.

Katie: Well, side note of Pop-up Prayer, I get a lot of people who send me their prayers and I'm so grateful for them. That's where Pop-up Prayer came from, was it started out as a necessity and then it became, "How do we continue to build relationship with each other and build a connection?" which is really what I've encountered being people's deepest need is a connection to other people and to God. One of the top questions I get from people is, "What time is pop-up prayer?" I say generally in the evening, but that's the pop-up part.

I pop up on Facebook and you don't know what time it's going to happen, and you don't know what kind of prayer thing you're going to get, and you don't know how long it's going to last. That's the beauty of it, is that every single pop up prayer has a different community that's gathered for it.

Kyle: Katie, that makes me wonder a little bit about how do you create a prayerful space on social media?

Katie: To be honest, it feels really natural. Pop-up Prayer is always, always a piece of my life. It's in my kitchen generally is where I plopped down to go do them. A lot of my reflections are drawn off of my daily experiences. It's no different than when you pray, Kyle or you pray, Sandy, it is where it is when you do it.

Sandy: I love that. I love when you say that it feels natural for you because as I watched some of the clips online, on Facebook, I got that sense that it's genuine and that is we get a piece of you, we get to experience, to be part of your life for a couple of minutes. Some episodes are 17 minutes, some episodes are five minutes or whatever, but we get to be part of your family and even meet your family, which I think is cool. What kind of need do you think this Pop-up Prayer meets for people that join in and maybe even for you?

Katie: So much of people's lives are lived wearing masks, whether having to be perfect, whether that's being the workaholic, whether that's I'm the great mom, whether that's the I'm the great priest or even the mask of I have my life pulled together. The truth is that none of us ever really have it all together all of the time. When you get to see someone be authentic to themselves, it invites you to be authentic to who you are, as well. Then, after you've been invited into being authentically you, the number two need that is met through Pop-up Prayer that I have encountered is people desire and long for connection with other people and with God.

The connection with people, it's fascinating because normally people, I think our knee-jerk reaction is to say, you can't have connection with people on social media because it's not real life. That's just not true. I found that in pop-up prayer, people pray for each other, they respond to each other through the little smiley face, with a laughing face or the heart, they get to engage and interact with each other in a way that is surprisingly deep.

Lastly, there's connection with God which for me is a big driving factor as to why I do Pop-up Prayer. I can't tell you the number of times that people send me messages saying, "No one has ever told me that they love me." "Every single night I go on pop-up prayer." "Not only do you tell me every single night that I am loved, but you told me that I loved just the way that I am." It is also just remarkable how God is able to work through this creation of sacred space on Facebook.

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Katie: You know the ones that get the highest ratings in terms of viewership are the ones that I do where I'm cooking. Well, actually, no, I take that back. The one that was the most popular was when the Presiding Bishop came on. Numbers never to be reached again unless he comes back on. After that, the cooking lesson ones and I can't figure it out. Those are lots of the ones that go really bad because I've planned them out and I know what I'm going to make and then I burn it or I forget a step.

One time I was blind baking my pie crust and forgot to like, you have to pop it back into the refrigerator or the freezer before you put it into the oven, otherwise, it will completely fall down. It will just melt. That definitely happened. For dinner that night, my kids had scrambled eggs with a side of pie crust.

Sandy: Well talking about Bishop Curry, I don't know if you knew that you became his method of praying while he was recovering from his surgery.

Katie: Well, when it was the 50th anniversary of the Diocese of Southwest Florida, he came and he came to our convention and preached and presided and taught and he did a clergy-only event the day before. I was late. I was sitting in the back there and was listening to him talk and of course, he's very engaging and wonderful and someone asked him about his prayer life.

He talks about doing the daily office and things like that. He said, "Oh, yes, I think it's my sister sitting right there in the back. She does this thing called Pop-up Prayer," and just called me out in front of all of my clergy colleagues which was how I think found out that he watched Pop-up Prayer which was great and wonderful.

Because I sort of been sitting back there and I was like, if it comes up, I think I might ask him if he'll come on Pop-up Prayer. Then once he said that, I was like, he's definitely getting asked. There was this great moment. I'm not trying to drive up views on it, but I do encourage people to watch it because you see me geek out and be giddy in a way that is just utterly embarrassing but utterly authentic. I did not know that up until that moment that he watched it. He explained to me how, it was either his daughter or his granddaughter set up a notification for him on his phone, so that way, it would go off when Pop-up Prayer came on.

I'm hoping that my ministry has some longevity to it. I'm only in my 30s. I'm hoping I've got some more highs to come, but at least so far, that was an absolute high for my ministry to be able to share prayer with Bishop Curry.

Kyle: Well, Katie, it has been wonderful getting to chat with you and hope we'll have you back on the show sometime in the future.

Katie: Well, thanks for having me on. Anyone who would love to connect with Pop-up Prayer and to experience it, if you search on Facebook for Katie Churchwell or Pop-up Prayer, you will find it and every day, we are there talking about life and talking about God and praying with each other.

Kyle: That wraps it up for this episode. The show was produced by Sandy Milien and me, Kyle Oliver. I handled the editing as well. Special thanks to Ana Hernandez for providing our theme and reflection music. Check out her website at anahernandez.org.

Sandy: You can subscribe to this show wherever you get your podcast, and we'd love it if you'd 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.

Hilary Raining: This is Hilary Raining from Gladwyne, Pennsylvania. Lord God, may we follow Christ's teaching. Coming before you with humble hearts, boldly offering our thanksgivings and concerns to you, and listening for your voice in our lives and in the world, whether in thought, word, or deed, individually or

corporately. Create an awareness within us that when we pray, we invite and dwell in your loving spirit. Amen.

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