



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 1, Episode 4: Worship – Putting God at the center

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

[music]

Kyle Oliver: Welcome back to *The Way of Love*, a podcast from The Episcopal Church about following Jesus and changing the world. I'm Kyle Oliver and I'm here with Sandy Milien.

Sandy Milien: Thanks Kyle, and a reminder to our audience: the Way of Love is a set of seven practices. Turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest. Today, we're talking about worship. In many ways, worship is at the center of the Christian experience, especially for people in The Episcopal Church, but it doesn't necessarily mean we think a lot about what worship means or why we do it. In this episode, we'll get to share a few different perspectives.

Kyle: As always, we're going to start with some teaching from Bishop Curry. The first thing I asked him was about, what's the difference between worship and another common Christian experience?

[music]

What in your mind is the difference between prayer and worship? I know sometimes that's confusing for folks. Sometimes it's confusing for me.

Bishop Curry: Let me tell you what I have finally figured out. This is Michael Curry. I don't know, I could be wrong, but if you ask why do we need to go somewhere and worship with a community of people? I can do that at home. Okay, that's true. There's a certain sense in which me having to get out of my home and be discomforted a little bit, to have to go somewhere else to be with a bunch of other people. Even if they're family and friends in the church I know and love and they all love me, but probably some of them I wouldn't choose to be with and probably a bunch of them I wouldn't be with in any other context probably.

There's something good about me having to get out of my world, Michael's world, and go into a place that's "us." That's the first step in unhinging me a little bit from my self-centeredness. That's the first step. The next step is the act of worship. To actually worship is a way of reminding me that I'm not the center of the universe. Another way to say it is, "Michael, you're not God. It's not all about you."

[laughter]

That is what worship ultimately is about. To behold that which is greater than all of us and of everything, of which we are a part, but not the whole. We are a part. That I think we have to go to church, so to speak, or synagogue, mosque, whatever it is, we have to go to our place of worship as a way of reminding us constantly so that the rest of our time is lived with the awareness. Because I think the great illusion of selfishness is that, "I'm God." That's why the Ten Commandments, "I'm the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no other gods but me."

That's why God loses his mind in the Old Testament and even in scriptures about idolatry, because it's the fundamental deception of the human person to be deceived into not being the human child of God, into being God themselves. Worship is to enter into a place with a group of people and to then do things that move me beyond me. Some of them are hymns, some of them are readings of Scripture, some of them are preaching, prayers, bread, wine. Bread and wine but it's more than that. Something else is here. The whole experience is actually ingeniously designed to de-center myself and re-center my life on God.

Kyle: I left my house. I'm here with these other people.

Bishop Curry: Exactly.

Kyle: We are looking to another.

Bishop Curry: Yes. Now go out into the world that way, instead of the way you came in. From Michael at the center, to God at the center of my life. That's a game changer. Now, to be honest, there's sometimes I don't want to do it,

[laughter]

but that's human.

[music]

Kyle: What are some ways you de-center yourself each week? How does it feel to put God or other people in the center of your awareness and concerns?

[music]

What do you think it is about—we have the prayers and that's familiar. We have Scripture and that's familiar. These are other practices from other parts of our lives, but when we come for worship there, our senses are

engaged in some ways that maybe we don't usually experience. How do you think that pulls us in? What is that?

Bishop Curry: I do think part of it has to do with the strangeness of it. Think about it, where else do you take bread and a glass of wine and make a fuss over it? When you think about it, or water and make a big to-do? There's something about the worship of the Church. I think at its best that actually is alien. In the Episcopal tradition, people vest and they put on costumes that are weird. Somebody might come in church and think, "Is this Halloween?" Everybody dressed up. It's weird that it's like this old stuff from ages ago. It's almost like from another world, which I think is where the power is.

That pushes us beyond being more creatures of the contemporary world, to ancient ways of coming in contact with God that are as old as Abraham and Sarah and Melchizedek in Genesis. The one in the Bible says he was so old, he had no birth or no death. [laughs] That's pretty old.

Kyle: That's an alien character.

Bishop Curry: It's alien. I always admire the Orthodox, because when you see Orthodox clergy in public, they look like people from another world, and they are.

Kyle: Yes. That's witness.

Bishop Curry: That's the witness. There is another world.

Kyle: Worship at its best pulls us out of ourselves. It puts us in community. It points us towards God. It reminds us of this mystery at the heart of creation.

Bishop Curry: Yes. There's a prayer in the prayer book that, "Oh God, you have taught us in returning and rest, we shall be saved. In quietness and in confidence shall be our strength." Then it says, "By the might of thy Spirit, lift us to thy presence where we may be still to know that you are God."

Kyle: There it is right there. Thank you so much. Really appreciate it.

Bishop Curry: Thank you, friend.

[music]

Kyle: Sandy, now that we've heard a little bit from Bishop Curry, I think we wanted to say a little bit about our experiences of worship. What's worship like for you each week?

Sandy: Well, we go to church twice every Sunday. I come from a family of priests and it's very diverse because my dad is in charge of the Haitian community and my mom is in charge of the Latino community. I get to experience church and worship in a different way every Sunday.

Kyle: Are those two communities part of the same church?

Sandy: Yes. They're two different churches that share the same space, if that makes sense. Two different communities that share the same space, but it's very similar culturally Latinx people and—these two communities share a lot in common culturally, the way I experience it. The worship in the Haitian community, it's more of a solemn, more of the "High Church" type of vibe. It's very like – incense – with the use of incense and the songs are a little slower. Compared to the Latino service that it's more hype music, more on the evangelical side. We get to sing and dance a little sometimes.

Kyle: Do you find that the different styles of worship change how you are relating with God during the service?

Sandy: I think so. I think I become someone different. I don't know if that makes sense or not, not necessarily become, but experience God in a different way while I'm in each service, because in the Haitian service I sit with the people, but in the Latinx service I'm part of the worship team.

Kyle: There is the piece where your role is different and then there's the piece where the worship that's going on around you is different, and both are a factor, it sounds like?

Sandy: Yes, they both are a factor. What about you? Do you have any special ways to worship? You've experienced different worship styles, I'm guessing.

Kyle: Yes, I've been a member of several different churches growing up. More recently I've been on the staff as a clergyperson of several different churches. I certainly resonate with that idea that the style of worship sometimes helps us access different feelings, maybe different parts of the witness of Scripture and the Christian story. I think some styles of worship just get at different aspects and different ways. I worked in one very traditional church, incense and very traditional vestments. A large percentage of the service was sung. It's interesting, I had a lot of people say that they really appreciated hearing the gospel sung, chanted.

Sandy: Yes. That's interesting, I've never experienced that before.

Kyle: I loved doing it. When I am in a church that worships in that style and someone else is chanting, I do not listen.

[laughter]

It's so funny. That style of worship, I love leading it, but it's not necessarily the home-base style of worship for me personally. The church that I've just finished working at recently before the move that my wife and I just did, I really fell in love with the service. It was a Sunday evening service, 25 folks probably on average. It's a really small, intimate gathering. Lots of the service, both the officiants' roles and the roles of the people, lots of it was improvised.

Sandy: That's fun.

Kyle: Yes. We knew what songs we were going to sing, and we knew the order of things each week. It was still predictable what was going to happen. Everything, from the sermon to the prayers, was sort of a group effort, and lots of people got to contribute. As the leader, it was sometimes slightly nerve-wracking because you never know what somebody's going to say. That's a good thing, I think. I really fell in love with that idea that— of course, we say that the liturgy is the work of the people, but when you're in a small group and when it's not totally scripted, that reality gets really emphasized.

You really just get the sense of, "Okay, we're actually building this experience of worship together." I found it really powerful. I miss it often.

Sandy: That reminds me of last year, when I was in New Hampshire doing my year with Episcopal Service Corps, we got to go to an Easter Vigil in one of the churches up there, and you saying that it was people were participating in the service reminded me of that day. I was asked to read one of the readings, but in the form of storytelling. It was very engaging because people were actually listening to you. I got to add my own sassiness and questioning to God—how you would think you would actually talk to God if you were, for example, Moses, God telling him to part the sea. You would be like, "Really, you think I can—" [laughs]

It is very different, and you feel like you leave that place understanding not only the Scripture, but your own experiences through the Scripture a little better. I think a lot of people do experience that when the service and the worshipping aspect of the service, is more engaging with the people.

Kyle: Yes, yes, and more maybe in our colloquial language, and bringing just our normal everyday ways of being to bear on the service. Then on the other end of the spectrum, I've also had really powerful experiences. I was in another one of those High Church kinds of settings one time. I remember going up for communion. This was a very old-style church where the screen that's up there separating the choir and the ministers from the people. That architectural element was there. I remember walking up and the front of the church was totally filled with incense, really totally filled.

The choir was singing on the left and on the right. I'm thinking of Bishop Curry talking about those Orthodox clergy and the sense of other-worldliness. I really did feel like I was entering this just whole other world that was all about having this rich encounter with this God who is mysterious, but in a good way. I just think it just goes to show that that's not my home base, that's not the thing I long for, but that really works too. Maybe this is particularly a clergy-centric perspective, I don't know, but I really am glad that we are part of a tradition that includes all of this.

Sandy: That's true. Like Bishop Curry says, people are always amazed when they come and visit Episcopal church because it's so intricate, it's so—People are dressed up, we use incense, we eat during the service.

Kyle: Yes, there's a lot going on.

[music]

That's a little bit about Sandy's and my experiences with worship, but we would love to hear some stories from you, our listeners. Take to social media and use the hashtag #WayofLove.

Sandy: The show was produced by Kyle Oliver and me, Sandy Milien. It was edited by Kyle. Special thanks to Ana Hernandez for providing our theme and reflection music. Check out her website at anahernandez.org.

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

Eduardo Rivera: This is Eduardo Rivera from Parkland, Florida. Oh God, be present to us as we gather with others before you to worship. Open our hearts and minds to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Help us give thanks, confess, and offer the brokenness of the world to you. As we break bread, may our eyes be opened to the presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit among us, making us into one body, the body of Christ, being sent forth to live the Way of Love. Amen.

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