



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 1, Episode 5: Learn – “Letting the Word master us”

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.

[music]

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 Oliver: Thanks, Sandy. As always in season one, we are talking about one of the Way of Love practices: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go and Rest. Today we are jumping into the practice “Learn”.

Sandy: Right. We’re going to start with Scripture and then at the end of the show, we’ll get back and talk a little bit about other kinds of learning. To start us off, Kyle, do you have a favorite passage of Scripture that you can share with us?

Kyle: Yes. This is one that often comes to me, and it’s Isaiah 61. “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.” I like a few things about this passage, but it’s one of the options for funerals in The Episcopal Church.

Sandy: I didn't know that.

Kyle: Yes, I don't know how often it gets used. We used it at my grandmother's funeral. I just hear that phrase, "oaks of righteousness." I like the idea of thinking of my grandmother as one of those, a sort of tree, rooted deeply and standing tall. I think of her legacy in my life whenever I hear those verses.

Sandy: I love that. That's great. Mine, it's a little, I don't know, it's different. In our church, we have a yearly slogan that we say every Sunday to remind people about what we're about this year, or our message for this year, or our goal for this year. The one we chose is Matthew 12:33-37, but the part that I like the most is the second half of verse 34 that says, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." I like that because it's teaching me a lot about my behavior and the importance and the impact of the words that I speak and, being a young adult, you're at this point in your life still deciding where to go and what to do.

A lot of times, there's a lot of pressure coming to you and people ask a lot of questions and you just don't know how to answer. It's very overwhelming. Words show a lot of who we are, our character, and we're constantly revealing to those around us who we are by what we say. At this point in my life, I need to ask God for a clean and peaceful heart so that I get to share blessings and not curses to people around me.

[music]

Kyle: Those are a couple of passages that have been meaningful for us. Now, we want to back up a little bit. On a super basic level, if you want to make daily Scripture reading a part of your spiritual life, how do you do that? Bishop Curry is going to get a break that down for us.

Bishop Curry: One, approach is not to try to-- don't bite off the whole thing. Take maybe a chapter, but maybe just seven or eight verses of a chapter where it finishes a story, if you will, something and you may have to look to see, but just that will be significant reading it. Now one of the things that I encourage, and I don't do it all the time because it depends on where I'm reading the Scripture, is, if possible, read out loud if you can feel comfortable doing that. We were all taught in school that we read out loud in first and second grade, but later on, you were supposed to read silently.

Well, the ancient way of reading was actually to read out loud. Well, if you're reading out loud, you actually digest the words.

Kyle: More of your body is involved.

Bishop Curry: Exactly. Somehow, other senses are involved in just the immediacy of the mind itself. The ears have to hear it. It's like you have to experience the text a little bit more than just pure cognition and then to spend some time with it. It doesn't have to be a lot of time, and there are some simple approaches or questions that can be asked of any text.

There's a tradition called *Lectio Divina* which is listening to the word. Listening for the word. Where you just simply, after you've read something, just sit and let it be for a moment and – what word, phrase, or image stood out? What was it? There's no good or bad or right or wrong. This isn't a grade school test. Now, what just stood out and spoke to you. Okay, that's good, and then you might read it again.

That's why I encourage you not to try to do a whole big long thing. Just do a short part of Scripture. Read it again and hear, what was Jesus saying? Or what's the Gospel writer saying? Or what's the writer of the Scripture, what are they literally saying? At least as far as you can figure out – learning to figure out? Then you might read it again. You don't have to read it three times, you can just do it once. What word that word or image may be your word or image for the day? But if you have some time, you could read it a second time and

ask what was in the passage, what does Jesus seem to be saying? And then if you have time read it another time. What might he be calling me to do?

I get nervous when people seem to know too much when they think they know what the Lord wants. What might he be calling you to do, or be, or something like that? The idea of hearing it three different times, a lot of people when they do this certainly in groups try to use different versions of the Bible. You actually hear different translations and you'll hear different things. And in groups, groups will hear different things because different people will hear differently. Words or images or ideas or phrases will pop out to different people and it's fascinating to hear what phrase stood out to somebody. What that is doing is less studying the Scripture, which can be us mastering it, and more us listening to Scripture and letting the Word maybe master us.

[music]

Sandy: Listen to these verses from Matthew's Gospel. "Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn't fall because it was firmly set on bedrock." What word or phrase sticks out to you?

[music]

Kyle: "Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn't fall because it was firmly set on bedrock." What is Jesus saying here? What might he be calling you to do?

[music]

I've heard you talk some about the social dimension of Scripture. What I'm reading here is not just about my life, but about the communities that I'm a part of and of God's relationship with this whole human family, ultimately. What are some ways of reading Scripture that can help us be aware of those social dimensions?

Bishop Curry: I think it was attributed to Karl Barth, that the best way to read Scripture is to read it with the Bible in one hand in the newspaper in the other. The wisdom and truth of that is to listen to Scripture and study Scripture and all of that and to read the morning news or the evening news at the same time. Actually, that creates a conversation even if it's you inside yourself, between how does this Word of God connect to the reality of the world? You don't have to have the answer to that all the time, but just living with the two in a conscious way creates the possibility of some symbiosis, some connection, some something.

Kyle: Can you think of a time when that connection was especially pronounced? Can you think of an example?

Bishop Curry: What has happened for me has been during Holy Week. It was soon thereafter I was in Burundi, in central Africa. For whatever reason during Holy Week, when one of the readings, morning or evening prayer, or maybe it was a reading for the Eucharist, I can't remember. It was from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, which the first one in the first chapter can be, "How lonely sits the city that was once full of people," or something like that. It's just a haunting image. Then it was a couple of weeks later, I was in a country that had just come out of 10 years of civil war. It doesn't only happen to be that close. Literally flying into Bujumbura, it's 10 years of war. And I looked out of the plane. I remember looking out of the plane and it was a city that was a heap of rubble. It was, "How lonely sits the city that was once full of people." It was like that Scripture, all of it just lit up. Now it's because I was having an experience that got connected to a word I heard that was in my mind because I had read it a couple of weeks before. It was just there that it actually did, it did

link. I did hear. Now, I don't want to get into any politics right now, but I have had the experience of reading especially the gospels and then listening to characterizations of Christianity in the public sphere.

Just feeling and knowing that there's a disconnect between what I'm reading about Jesus and what I'm hearing said about the Christian faith from Christians. I'm not talking about what somebody else was talking about. From Christians in the public sphere. That has happened even recently, where I've said, "Wait a minute, that's not the Jesus I'm hearing in these gospels." It is something that I've been hearing in the Scripture, that it's becoming like how certain songs become earworms. They just got a hanger on, and you find yourself singing or humming this tune all day long – I think living with Scripture, it can become an earworm.

When something that's related to the condition that the Scripture was addressing, even if it was another context, emerges and you run into it, whether you read it about it in the news or hear about it or you encounter or experience it, then all of a sudden, it is like the Bible says: "The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us." Then it can speak to me in a new way and help me maybe make sense of what I'm living right now.

[music]

Kyle: We're back and that vision that we just got from Bishop Curry of the way that we read Scripture and it sits with us and we go out and we have other experiences, and those experiences maybe resonate with the Scripture, and the whole thing works on us over time, I think that's a really good way of describing a Christian vision for learning and for formation. I think that's why we sometimes use that word, because it's not just about, like sitting in the classroom or learning new information or whatever.

It reminds me a little bit of this fairly well-known Roman Catholic religious educator. She was writing in the later part of the 20th century and wrote this book that's still in print called *Fashion Me a People*. Her point is that the sort of various things that we do as the church community, she calls them "curriculum," almost like there's a plan for how we learn. She talks about the curriculum of prayer and the curriculum of proclamation, and of teaching, and of fellowship, and of service. All the stuff that we do work together and that all of them together are forming us as individuals and as the people of God as a whole.

One of the things that I think is important about what Harris says is that formation, it doesn't just change us like that. It's a process, and that process requires that we take time for reflection. When we step back and reflect, that's where we consolidate the learning that's happening all the time. Sometimes we don't notice it. If we don't notice it, then it's hard to integrate it into our lives. You were telling me, Sandy, about a cool site of faith learning where you were a teacher. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Sandy: Yes. It was interesting, actually, because I've never experienced anything like that. I spent a summer in Ecuador as an intern in an outdoor retreat center. Their vision or their purpose was to facilitate a deeper relationship with Jesus through nature and adventure. During my time there as an intern I would lead teams through different ropes courses like high ropes or low ropes courses like in the summer camp type of style.

Anyway, it seems we have to work together to achieve a specific goal in the sometimes very challenging courses. These courses require time, focus, dedication and even trusting – not on yourself, but other people. I think all of those things are also the mandate of our spiritual life. The best part of that was not only leading them through the exercise, it was we facilitating, creating a time for the participants to reflect as a team, but also as individuals, on what God was calling them to do. What did I learn from this experience? How was God helping me to reshape maybe not only myself, but the world in which I lived in, because some of the activities, experiences, were difficult.

One of them was even called Jacob's Ladder. It required you to use all of your senses and a lot of strength. It was very challenging. Even the interns couldn't finish it. We couldn't do it. It was too difficult. It was so

amazing because it was a sense of, “I had to climb this ladder not by myself. I needed someone else to push me through it.” So, how can I maybe put that in practice in my life – not only my spiritual life, but other aspects of my life? How am I climbing my ladder, my journey as a Christian, as a human being, as a child of God, to live a life with purpose and having God in the center of that? It was a cool experience because we were able to use nature.

Kyle: I think there’s something so powerful about that idea of like, “Hey we can learn about our faith through trying to climb the ladder together.” Right?

Sandy: Right.

Kyle: This whole podcast is about this idea of practices. I think that conviction that’s underneath that lens is that, yes, it’s important what practices we do. We should choose them wisely and in accordance with something about tradition and something about our own needs and what have you. Ultimately the call is to just get out there and do something. Pick a practice, engage with it for a while, and then see what you learn.

Sandy: Maybe share with someone else and see if that person can maybe also put it into practice.

Kyle: Yes. Thanks for joining us for our episode on “Learn”. The show was produced by Sandy Milien and me, Kyle Oliver. I also serve as editor. Special thanks to Ana Hernández 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 podcasts. We’d love it if you’d rate, review, or share with a friend. If you’d like to contribute music, a prayer, or feedback write us at wayoflove@episcopalchurch.org.

Jenifer: This is Jenifer Gamber from Washington, D.C. “Oh God, from whom all wisdom flows, guide us in the reading and reflecting on Scripture, especially on the life and teachings of Jesus. Help us to draw near to you as your Word begins to dwell in us. May we open our minds and hearts to your Word, so that we may see your story and your work present in our everyday lives. Amen.”

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