



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 1, Episode 6: Bless – Sharing & listening to the stories of life

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 "Bless" – share faith and unselfishly give and serve.

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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. We are continuing our journey through the seven Way of Love practices: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. This episode we're talking about bless and we have two very special guests to help us do that.

Kyle: Yes, that's right, Bishop Curry recently sat down for a conversation about two Way of Love practices with Canon Stephanie Spellers, who works on issues of evangelism, reconciliation, and stewardship of creation for The Episcopal Church. And not for nothing, she's also our boss on the project of this podcast.

Sandy: Right, so without further ado, let's throw it to Canon Stephanie and Bishop Curry.

Canon Stephanie Spellers: I imagine a lot of people are comfortable with the idea of blessing as a part of giving and serving and not necessarily as the practice of sharing our faith. For people who have this idea that evangelism is manipulative or that it's convincing people to believe like I believe, how would you help them to re-imagine the practice of sharing our faith?

Bishop Curry: Part of it has to do with, for me anyway, getting over the fact that one-on-one evangelism is not a church service with an altar call. There is a place for church service and altar call, but that's not what we're talking about in terms of being a presence for and with evangelism in my life. If you look at Jesus, he's a good example of what evangelism looks like. Jesus is always in conversation with people about their lives and his life.

He doesn't actually preach sermons – well, he does preach sermons – but in his conversations, he doesn't preach sermons. He actually engages the person he's with and listens to them and listens to their story and sometimes shares his story as well. His technique is more listening than it actually is talking. I actually believe that the practice of real evangelism by us as individuals is more listening than it is talking— listening to the story of others. Listening for the ways the Spirit of God is already moving in their lives. Listening to the ways that God is present in their life and in your own life and then sharing those journeys together.

I actually happen to believe that evangelism doesn't have an outcome that we predetermine or that we intend. The intention is not for us to make another Episcopalian, although that's great. The intention is not for us to make another Christian, though that is great. The intention is for us to be on a journey with somebody else and journey with them into a deeper relationship with the living God that we've known in Jesus Christ.

That's the journey and so it's not so much my knowing all the right Bible passages. It's not so much my being able to quote scripture or know all the spiritual answers, it is about sharing the spiritual journey of life with a brother or sister or sibling who's on the same journey that you're on.

Canon Spellers: I feel like what you've just described really matches up with placing this practice of sharing our faith as a part of a blessing. That for some people they might imagine sharing faith is an obligation but actually, it is a blessing. You are sharing the blessing of relationship that you might have with God but just offering that up and then hearing someone else's story, you get blessed. It's this wonderful circle of blessing that just keeps radiating and circling around us. It's not something that you have to be forced to do. It's actually a blessing to practice.

Bishop Curry: I remember when I was Bishop of North Carolina and we were having conversations about this kind of thing. I went to a church and I was having a conversation with members of the vestry. We were talking about how people have listened to the stories of others and their own stories. This was the result of having done some faith sharing exercises in the congregation where people were sharing their stories. I remember several members of the vestry talked about they had been members of that church for years and had never actually listened to the spiritual stories of others in the congregation.

They said, "I didn't actually know how you even became a member of this church, much less a follower of Jesus," and all that kind of stuff. Out of that conversation, one particular woman who taught at a local community college or was a guidance counselor or a counselor at a local community college said that just the practice at church of listening to the stories of other people who are already in church actually informed how she was listening to students who were part of her work.

She said suddenly she began to realize very often the questions that were being asked by her students were not just simply academic questions about, do I have to take Biology 101 in order to take Biology 102? They were actually, what does biology have to do with the rest of my life? Why am I taking courses in science? Is it because I want to be some kind of scientist or enter a scientific field? Why do I want to do that? Do I want to do that because that actually is a way I can contribute to humanity?

She said when you actually listen to real practical and real questions behind those practical and real questions were spiritual questions and yearnings and very often a story began to unfold that informed those yearnings. She realized that there was a whole spiritual world that she wasn't paying attention to before. That's what this

evangelism as mutual listening and sharing of lives. That's what really going on there. You see it in the Bible. You actually do see it in Jesus in John, chapter four, that story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well.

It is a classic conversation, where, on one level, the conversations are about drinking water and what time of day it is and why are you here and why are you talking to me? Don't you know I'm a Jew and you're a Samaritan? We're not supposed to get along and it's basic human relation social dynamics. Yet on other levels, as the conversation goes deeper, it moves from the basic stuff of their social world to their spiritual world. Every encounter we have with each other has levels of basic personal relationships, political stuff, economic stuff, work stuff, and underneath it all, there's a child of God who's got a story to tell. That's where evangelism happens and it's not about manipulation, it's about actually caring for each other's souls.

Canon Spellers: Which is a blessing.

Bishop Curry: That's a blessing.

Canon Spellers: Isn't it just, who doesn't want to receive that blessing? I don't want anybody coming and telling you what I should believe or that I'm wrong or that I'm going to hell. I definitely want somebody to open up a space where the stories of goodness and love and my life have a place. Where this other person actually wants to hear me share this. I long for that moment. If I'm a human being, I long for the moment of being heard like that. Thank you. All I would say is thank you. If someone offered that space up for me, it would just be like drinking water. Taking water in on a parched throat. Just saying, "I needed this so much." What a blessing that we could offer that with people and receive that from each other.

Bishop Curry: Maya Angelou, I don't remember what, it was an interview. I remember her pausing in the conversation and saying to the interviewer, she said, "Listen to your life. Listen to the stories that it tells." Evangelism is about listening to life, to discover the stories that it tells and the God who may well be one of the authors of those stories.

Kyle: Think of someone you're likely to spend time with this week. How could you create a space for a conversation that could be a blessing to you both?

[music]

Canon Spellers: Tell us about a time that someone listened to your story of faith or helped you to even hear your own story better. Was there ever a moment that someone opened up that space for you?

Bishop Curry: Well, ironically, and this probably isn't the best illustration but it was part of my journey to becoming a priest. It was in that I was in college and I remember sitting down talking with the chaplain who was on the campus and I was talking obliquely about a lot of stuff. Campus politics and stuff that was going on and I thought that was the discussion we were going to have, and I thought that's what I wanted to talk to him about. I was running for president of the student association. I was talking to him about that, but a conversation that I thought was going to be about, the politics of running for president of the student association and all that kind of stuff became a conversation about what did I want to do with my life.

I don't remember exactly how that happened. I just remember that it did. And that conversation eventually led to a conversation in time, not at that one sitting, a conversation about maybe the way for my life was to become a priest. Now that was just, it was clearly a vocation. I was a student and it was kind of a vocational conversation. I thought I was there to talk about politics. I was there to talk about God in my life and what was I going to do in light of it? Yes, it's a game-changer in my life. I mean over the years, there's just been remarkable conversations both as a priest and just as a person with people who in the course of the

conversation unveiled, peeled behind what the present was and peeled away slowly until we got to the core of what the real story was. That happens all the time. It happens all the time.

Canon Spellers: I feel like what you're describing, that part of what happens when we bless or when we are blessed is that unveiling. That what blessing does is it pours forth whatever is necessary so that the thing being blessed becomes what it was always supposed to be. Here you were sharing your story with this chaplain and what he was doing was helping you to unveil or to recognize, this is the Michael Curry who's been there all along but let's bring him forth. The blessing draws that out. It celebrates it. It calls it into being. It calls us into being.

Again, I feel like that's what we do when, if I'm blessing by giving for instance, if I'm giving money and blessing, part of what I'm doing is helping to bring forth whatever it is that needed my financial resource in order for it to flourish. If I'm blessing by offering hospitality, what I'm doing is creating this space that someone gets to step into and be fully received and become fully who they were born to be. If I'm blessing by hearing your story or sharing mine, the same is true. Does that make sense?

Bishop Curry: That makes a lot of sense. There is something, I don't know who said it. "That the unreflective life is not worth living," or something like that. I don't remember, was that Emerson or somebody? I'm sure somebody famous like that.

Canon Spellers: It sounds very Emersonian, we will go with that. Transcendental.

Bishop Curry: It does. There is something about that that the real message of that is that life to be lived and not simply a matter of being existent, does call forth the kind of self-reflection, that you listen to your life, as Maya Angelou said. And that in that listening to your life over time, there are blessings to be found. There really are. I'm not good at journaling. I wish I was. I always wanted to be somebody who could, like every day at the end of the day kind of journal and I just don't do it. It's just not in my internal discipline to do it, but I wish that I could, but I do periodically especially on retreat, when I take time for retreat, get time to think about what's been going on.

Just take the calendar and look back, and say, "What have been doing for the last six months?" or something like that. And just look and think back. "What did that mean? I didn't pay attention to that when I was doing that. What was that? What was going on there?" After a while, you do sometimes see patterns in your own life. It's like that poem, *Footprints in the Sand*. You actually see footprints in the sand and sometimes they're your footprints and another set of footprints. Sometimes it's just one set of footprints, but you know it's your story. You wonder what are those footprints about? What's the story of those? Who was I walking with? What was going on?

My experience, I'm not good at recognizing the presence of the Spirit in the moment. Now, if I'm in church or something and you feel, that's one thing. But I'm talking about in life, in the midst of meetings and doing stuff and things happening, I don't tend to see the Spirit in that moment, but when I look back, I tend to see - oh my God, there was a pattern there. There was something going on more than what I thought was going on and with the other people who were involved. When you look at that say, "There was somebody else there."

There's a story in the Book of Daniel - Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the three boys in the fiery furnace, that kind of stuff. The bad king throws them in the furnace and expects them to get killed. He looks in the furnace and there four people in there. He said, "I just threw three people in there." He realizes, "Oh my God. God has been in there with them." Sometimes when you look back on your life, on just a period in your life, you say, "Well, I was there. I know I was part of that but wait a minute. There was something else going on there. There was somebody else going on there."

And my experience of seeing the Lord in my life has been sometimes looking back and realizing, I didn't make that happen. We didn't make that happen. We got a blessing that none of us created. Like the song says, "Surely the Lord is in this place."

Canon Spellors: Surely, we need other people with us on the road so that we can recognize those moments, right? So that someone can remind you, "Hey, Michael look back." Whether that's a spiritual director or a dear friend or a family member, you're like I need – I'm like you – sometimes I journal. I try to when I'm really in my spiritual practice, I'm keeping a prayer journal, a daily prayer journal every night doing that kind of review. If I'm not in that practice, I need somebody around me to say, "Hey, do you remember?" "Hey, have a look back." That person is such a blessing to me, asking me to recognize God's presence in my own life because I simply forgot to look.

Bishop Curry: Yes, you keep moving. You're busy moving forward. It's almost like you got to glance back to look ahead.

Canon Spellors: Yes.

[music]

Kyle: Well, we're back, and Sandy does anything stick out to you in that conversation?

Sandy: Yes. Definitely. What sticks out to me is the word "unveiling". That idea that a blessing is and can be bringing forth who or what we're meant to be. To bring forth our calling that sometimes gets buried under social expectations and recognizing who I am and want to be, so that my actions and the path that I take can be a blessing to those around me and also myself. How about you, Kyle?

Kyle: Yes, I'm a second-guesser, an over-thinker, and I can have a hard time living in the moment. For me, the thing that stuck out was just that point that even Michael Curry has trouble sometimes recognizing the Spirit in the moments of his life and needs those opportunities to look back. That was really reassuring to me. I felt like it took off a little pressure.

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Sandy: Thanks for joining us for our episode on Bless. The show was produced by Kyle Oliver and me, Sandy Milien, and edited by Kyle. Special. Thanks to Ana Hernández for providing our theme and reflection music. Check out her website at anahernandez.org.

Kyle: We had additional music this week by Philipp Weigl. His *Western Shores* is published under a Creative Commons Attribution license at freemusicarchive.org. You can subscribe to the show wherever you get your podcasts and we'd 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.

Bill Campbell: This is Bill Campbell from Alexandria, Virginia. Just as Jesus called his disciples to give, forgive, teach, and heal in his name, we are empowered by the Spirit to bless everyone we meet, practicing generosity and compassion and proclaiming the good news of God in Christ with hopeful words and selfless actions. Help us, O Lord, to boldly share our stories of blessing and invite others to follow your Way of Love. Amen.

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