



THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

THE WAY OF LOVE

with Bishop Michael Curry

Season 1, Episode 7: Turn – Learning to live unselfishly

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 "Turn" – pause, listen, and choose to follow 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. I'm Sandy Milien and I'm here with Kyle Oliver.

Kyle Oliver: Thanks, Sandy. Another reminder for everyone that the Way of Love practices are turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go and rest. Today, we're going to talk about what it means to turn.

Sandy: That's right. We're going to start off with a conversation between Bishop Curry and Canon Stephanie Spellers, who will talk a bit about a couple of understandings of turn, and then we'll come back and add some of our own experiences.

Kyle: That sounds great. Let's go to Canon Spellers and Bishop Curry.

Canon Stephanie Spellers: I just want to maybe start out with a little bit of clarification because when we hear that word, turn, and think of it as a spiritual practice, there are a lot of ways to approach it. When we especially are focused on the Way of Love, what we're really talking about is turning toward God. Turning and saying, "I know right now I am on a path that is not leading me closer to God, but I want to turn toward God. I know I'm on a path that, frankly, fulfills some of my own selfish interests, but doesn't really fulfill my purpose in God's world and God's dream. How do I turn toward God?"

With that in mind, understanding turning to be that practice of coming home again to God, how is it that you and your life have turned? Has there ever been a moment when you found yourself on a path, maybe moving a little further from God, and felt like, “Wait, wait, wait, I’m going home to God.”

Bishop Curry: There are big moments and there are little moments. The little moments tend to be more continuous. What I mean by that is the turning image, as you were talking about turning, which is the word that’s actually behind the word “repent.” When we think repent, it’s beating up on yourself because I’ve been bad, it’s actually turning – to repent is to turn toward God from the path of direction I was going away from God, to turn toward God.

An image that I was having, as you were talking about it was the image of a flower, that turning from the darkness to the light, to the source of light and receiving the energy of the light so that the plant actually lives. That’s what turning is about. Turning from the darkness or from that which doesn’t feed and doesn’t nurture, turning to the source of the life energy, the light, that which gives life.

The experience that I’ve had most consistently of turning has happened when I’ve turned away from the light, and realize that, and deliberately and intentionally turned back toward it. Let me tell you what I mean by that. I really do believe that Jesus of Nazareth, that if you look at Jesus carefully, at the way he lives his life, both what he taught and what he did, and how he did it, that what you see are a bunch of characteristics, but among them, is he’s loving, he’s liberating, and he’s life-giving. I think that reflects God. That’s part of what we mean by Jesus being the Word of God made flesh, that Jesus is the human face of God.

To turn, is to turn into the direction of that which is loving, that which is liberating, and that which is life-giving, that is to turn in the direction of God. Where I’ve seen that in my own life is when I’m on my regular schedule and I’m just doing stuff, and doing what I had—we all do this, you gotta to do stuff, that’s part of work and it’s part of living, you gotta do stuff.

If anybody who’s got a family and raise kids, you got to keep the house going, you got to get the kids to school, you got to do this, you’re going to feed them, you got to make sure you’ve got work, you’ve got to get an income, you’re going to pay bills, you’ve got to do this, you’re going to do that and all of that’s necessary. Sometimes when that is all that you do and all that you are, that which is necessary may not be loving, may not be liberating and may not be life-giving. Sometimes you have this stop and turn back to the source. You see what I’m getting at?

Canon Spellers: Like that flower turning back to the light.

Bishop Curry: Like that flower. To get that life-giving energy from the source of love, life, and liberty itself. See what I mean? Everybody thinks about repentance and turning as if it’s just about being bad or being good. No, it’s about turning away from that which does not give life to that which is actually life-giving. That’s God. Ultimately, that’s God.

Where it happens most regularly is where I find myself on the treadmill, not even paying attention to why am I running on this? What’s this about? Having to either stop the treadmill, as I said, “Jump off the treadmill,” or slow it up just enough so that I can think, “Okay, be still, know that God is God. Now, go forward again.”

[music]

Sandy: Take a minute and reflect on something that might be turning you away from God, away from the light. How about you turn back to that which is loving, liberating, and life-giving.

[music]

Canon Spellers: There was a word that I heard you mention when you were sharing about turning toward God. And that word, take a deep breath, was “sin”.

Bishop Curry: S-I-N.

Canon Spellers: S-I-N.

Bishop Curry: Oh, my goodness.

Canon Spellers: A lot of people have a difficult relationship with even just the word “sin”. They have felt just beaten over the head with it, they have felt oppressed by it, and yet, the idea of sin, understanding sin, like, it doesn’t go away for Christians, and really, for anyone who’s trying to follow a path toward wholeness and being loving. There’s got to be an understanding of sin, so how do you break that open for people? I heard you offering some of this. I just want to invite you to stay with it for a moment and to say, what are the teachings about sin that you find most useful? How would you help followers of Jesus to maybe have a positive relationship or understanding of sin?

Bishop Curry: There is, I remember reading years ago when I was in seminary rather, and I believe it was in a sermon of Paul Tillich, where he said, “sin is separation.” The text, if I remember correctly, was from Isaiah, either chapter 58 or 59, where there’s just this quick reference that said, “Our sins,” or “our wrongs,” “have created a breach that has separated us from you, O Lord,” or something like that.

In the sermon, it’s developed around that, now, I don’t remember all the details of that. That image of sin as a separation, that which separates us from that loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God, that loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with each other, and that loving, liberating, and life-giving relationship with ourselves. That’s what sin is. Where I’m beginning to see that more deeply and I think understand it a little bit more is when I begin to think of sin less as a moral infraction and more as anything that I do or any attitude that I have, or anything that is within me, that is all about me and discount you or God, or anybody else.

I really do believe that sin really is unbridled selfishness. Now, I distinguish between that unbridled selfishness, self-centeredness, and a genuine self-love, self-esteem and self-respect. That genuine self-love and self-respect is that capacity to honor myself as God’s creation. To care, you know Paul talks about “the temple of the Spirit.” To care for the temple that God has given me, to care for who I am and to love and cherish and honor that. But selfishness, self-centeredness, is about the whole world exists for me and to serve me and for my pleasure and for what I want and all that.

That is, if it’s all about me, to heck with God, to heck with you, and to heck with everybody else, and to heck with the world. That’s what sin is. That’s why Tillich I think was right when he said that reality separates us, alienates us from God, from each other, from the creation, and ultimately, from our true selves. Sin is much deeper than at least what I grew up thinking it was. Let me do it this way.

I was in conversation with somebody not long ago from a culture that’s not particularly religious and they were saying, “In our culture, people were asking me, ‘Why do I need the religious faith? I’m a nice person. I live a decent life. I don’t beat up on anybody and all that kind of stuff.’” I said, “Well, that’s true, but I really believe that the great religious issue that religions engage deeply – some people use the world sin, but let’s find another word – is self-centeredness.”

In my experience of life, I need help to overcome my self-centeredness. I can’t just grit my teeth and make myself be unselfish. I just can’t do that. Now maybe that’s me and not others, but I got a feeling if I step on my own toe, I’m probably stepping on somebody else’s too. I think that’s human that we can’t just make ourselves unselfish, that you almost have to unlearn the way of selfishness and learn selflessness to discover the true self.

That's what the religious enterprise is about. Jesus said, "Whoever would be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me".

That's what the spiritual teachers have been trying to teach us. That's what Jesus is getting at on the way to the cross. Unlearning self to discover the true self and show the whole world this is how you do it. I don't buy the argument that we don't need religious faith. We need real religious faith, not bogus religious faith that's often purveyed even by the institution of religion. Sin is real but it's not what we used to think it was.

Canon Spellers: I love the image of sin as whatever it is that's turning me away from God, turning me toward that shadow. When I'm in that shadow place and I'm thinking that flower you were describing – when the flower is not turned toward the light, it bows down a bit. The petals tilt down. The stem tilts down. And that turning away from that shadow, turning toward this light that is God, when we do that, we are like the flower to stretching back up again. Stretching back up, the petals begin to lift and face towards the sun. That's a beautiful flower. That is a flower fully being with that flower was supposed to be.

Again, yes, we may speak of sin and if there's something that's bad I guess about sin, maybe it's really that when you were in that state of being turned away from God, alienated from God, you're going to be tilted down. You may feel, somebody may have told you, "When you do these things you're going to feel good and this is good for you," But if you actually look at that person or look at yourself in that state of alienation from God, you are tilted down, tilted in, maybe toward yourself. Hello!

But to be lifted up and out is a beautiful thing. It looks like life. It looks like something that can also give life to others. Thank you for that image and for that invitation to turn toward the light who is the true light, God.

[music]

Sandy: Well, we're back. We just heard from Bishop Curry two examples of turning. One was the idea of getting off the treadmill of busyness and then more generally turning from selfishness toward relationship. Kyle, do you have another way of thinking about "turn" and what it means?

Kyle: Yes, I was thinking back to an experience I had in college. I went to engineering school, and I feel like all I did for four and a half years was math problems. It's just like that there's just this like never-ending stream of problems that you had to get through. I went right from undergrad to grad school. I remember I was right back in that same pattern. I had an office and after class, I would just go to the office and I would do some homework or I would work on research. I would just be trudging home in the cold and the wind at 10:30 at night and just thinking like, this is not how you're supposed to live.

It's started with just one little turn, one little adjustment, one little new practice at some time every night, six o'clock or seven o'clock or something, at some point, I said, "You know what, if this thing isn't due tomorrow, then that's going to be enough. And I'm going to go to the gym and then I'm going to go home." I'm thinking about what Steph said about turning toward God, but I think it's a little bit of that treadmill of busyness thing and for me, that the turn moment was stopping and saying like, "It's okay to want a different life from this."

I'm not sure if I would have recognized it as a turn at the time, but as I look back now, it definitely feels like a turn toward God via sustainable living where there was actually room for something that wasn't work.

Sandy: Well, for me the turning that I have in my life became my passion. I was born in the Dominican Republic. I'm half Dominican, half Haitian. This island had been colonized by Spaniards and having this idea of whiteness and straight hair is the norm. Even growing up, we never talked about our identity and our heritage of African descent, our blackness. Moving to the United States, I grew up in a more diverse community going to a more

diverse school with people from all over the world. Then going to college, I had the opportunity to go to Ecuador and also Uganda and do really deep learning and research on blackness in different aspects of cultures.

The turning point was realizing, “No, no, no. I have to fight, and I have to help others become aware that who they are is enough. Who they are is important. Who they are is who they are.” Also pushing for people in my inner circles to realize and understand that they need to leave those old ways behind and have those conversations about creating a culture where we are accepting of ourselves.

Kyle: Same question for you like, where was God in the turn?

Sandy: Growing up, also as a woman, people have so many expectations and ideals of who you should look like. I changed my hairstyle and a lot of people did not receive it well. They were thinking, they were saying, “No, you look this certain way and that’s not the way you supposed to look.” I would be asking God, “Is this right? How is this helpful in my life?” It was very confusing, but I think God was there by allowing those experiences of going abroad and talking to different people from different cultures who are really into their culture, who are really into their roots to understand it’s okay.

It’s okay to own who you are. It’s okay to live in your identity and not apologize for it and be proud in that way I want to feel, I want to be, and I want others to see me. It was loving, because I learned love for everything about who Sandy is and liberating because I was no longer shackled by the ideas of “This is who Sandy is supposed to be,” and “This is who Sandy is supposed to look like,” and “Blackness is horrible, ugly, in the Latinx world.” No, no, no. I was liberated. Now I have no problem going up to anybody and telling them, “You are wrong. I am who I am, and this is great. This person is who they are, and this is great.” Own it. Live it. Be okay with it.

[music]

Kyle: Well, that wraps it up for this episode on “Turn”. Thanks so much for joining us. The show was produced by Sandy Milien and me, Kyle Oliver, and edited by me as well. 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 and we would love it if you would 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.

Sharon Ely Pearson: This is Sharon Ely Pearson from Norwalk, Connecticut. Like the disciples, we are called by Jesus to follow the Way of Love. Help us, O God, to remember that with your help, we can turn from the powers of sin, hatred, fear, injustice, and oppression toward the way of truth, love, hope, justice, and freedom. And that in turning, we reorient our lives to Jesus Christ, falling in love again, again, and again. Amen.

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