

The Way of Love

Last May, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, received a great deal of media attention after he preached at the “Royal Wedding” of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in England. Some weeks later, in his opening sermon to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church meeting in Austin, Texas, Bishop Curry preached about the “Way of Love” and he invited the entire Church to join in this intentional journey for the next three years.

Last Tuesday, I was able to hear Bishop Curry preach at the Episcopal High School here in Alexandria. He spoke about the “Way of Love”. In fact, some of his themes sounded familiar to what I remembered from the summary of the Royal Wedding Sermon I read, so I went online and read the text from the wedding. Bishop Curry began his wedding sermon with a quotation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love, and when we do that we will make of this old world a new world; for love is the only way.”

It has been said that a preacher really only has one sermon. If that’s true then Bishop Curry’s one sermon is the “Way of Love”. He’s learned that from Jesus, who when asked “What is the greatest commandment?” replied, “Love God with all your heart, all your strength, all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” Love is the only way.

Hours before his arrest Jesus said, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another...” Those who watched the Christian movement change the world in the first century said “See how they love one another...”

John, Jesus’ closest friend and disciple, wrote “we love because we were first loved... God is love... those who love know God.” Jesus’ ministry was all about love – healing, teaching, preaching, confronting injustice, violence, hatred and evil. Dr. King learned well from his Baptist minister father, “Love is the only way...”

Today, in the Gospel reading, we see the reaction to Jesus’ preaching in his home town of Nazareth. This story in Luke’s narrative comes after Jesus’ baptism, and, then, his time of temptation in the wilderness. Luke introduces this story to us by writing, “Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee... a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country ... he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all...”

Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah; Isaiah describes the work of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, who will come to redeem Israel ... He will preach good news to the poor ... proclaim release to the captives ... give sight to the blind ... free those who are oppressed ... proclaim the year of the Lord, the coming of God’s Kingdom

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Today's Gospel reading starts with the rest of the story, Jesus saying "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing..." The way of love – at the start of Jesus' ministry and at the end, on the cross. This way of love finally penetrated the heart of Saul who would become Paul. Saul was a violent man who was so zealous for the ancient Jewish law that he hunted down and executed Christians, until his conversion on the road to Damascus. Then Saul became Paul, a man of love.

And, so, in today's lectionary readings we hear Paul's great chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, often the preferred reading at weddings. But Paul wrote this not thinking about a bride and groom on their wedding day. He wrote it to a group of Christians in Corinth who he knew quite well. He knew their conflicts, their pride, their self-centeredness, their insisting on their own way. Paul wrote to say "there is no other way but love"

It has been suggested that we should read this passage by putting Jesus into every place the word love appears. Try it ...

Bishop Curry took some questions after his sermon from several of the Episcopal High students. Most asked questions about pain, suffering, evil, how to love or find the power to love when things seem so bad.

He responded in two ways. First, love will always win in the end. Jesus on the cross isn't the end of the story. It might take 40 days, 40 years, 4000 years, but God's love always triumphs. Love is stronger than death. Love is our entry to the eternal, to heaven.

And, second, we need each other; love brings us together, love makes us into a community, together we are stronger than we are apart. Jesus knew how hard it would be, so he called the disciples, the Church to be one, as he and God the Father are one.

That's why we are here. That's why we are Grace Church. That's why we take our worship so seriously. That's why Pastoral Care and Outreach and Mission Ministries are so vital. We do this work together, looking beyond Jesus on the cross; knowing love is the only way.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30