

## “The Way of Love: “Turn”

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 13, 2020  
N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Church – The Rev. Torrence Harman  
Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-38

In 2018 Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church USA introduced a theme for the Church titled “The Way of Love: Practices for Jesus-Centered Life.” He introduced it this way:

“In the first century Jesus of Nazareth inspired a movement. A community of people whose lives were centered on Jesus Christ and committed to living the way of God’s unconditional, unselfish, sacrificial, and redemptive love. Before they were called “church” or “Christian,” this Jesus Movement was simply called “the way.” Today I believe our vocation is to live as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.”

With this beginning Bishop Curry introduces the concept, deeply seeped in the tradition of the church, of a Rule of Life by which to live a Christ centered life as an individual in relationship with Christ and as individuals living within community. This rule involves practices grouped under simple headings. Seven in number, like the days of Creation, they include **Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest.** For this week and succeeding weeks, one by one, these will serve as themes for our reflection. I guess you could view this Way of Love and these themes as presenting us with a curriculum for the time being. Today, we turn to

### Turn

Turn, in this Way of Love way of life is described as involving to “pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus.” Turning offers the image of re-orienting ourselves and our lives. Towards what direction? God! The Way curriculum offers: “Like the disciples, we are called by Jesus to follow the Way of Love. With God’s help, we can turn from the powers of sin, hatred, fear, injustice, and oppression toward the way of truth, love, hope, justice, and freedom.” In turning, we re-orient our lives to Jesus Christ as we follow the ways he showed us with his life.

Return to the Lord! Repent and return! This the message all the prophets shout to the people who have wandered away, either mindlessly or intentionally, from the ways of the Lord. Not just the towering figures of the Old Testament “mouthpieces” of God, but the one who opens the Good News of the Gospels in the New Testament: John the Baptist, preparing the way, calling people into the desert with the message of repent and return, the prelude to Jesus’ appearing on the scene and commencing his ministry. It is not a one-man ministry. Jesus’ ministry of redemption, re-orientation, return and renewal for the created order needs disciples, followers. Contemporary theologian Richard Rohr uses the term, “multipliers.”

Today, our passages from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and from the Gospel of Matthew offer us an opportunity for Christ followers to turn away from old ways of thinking, acting and being that are unhealthy for individuals and for the community. Both passages are dealing with judgement.

Paul questions his Christian audience: “Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” He reminds us that “each of us will be accountable to God.”

Our good friend Peter in our Gospel passage today asks Jesus how often must we forgive when someone else sins against us. Should we forgive seven times? (Reading this I remember the idea that the number seven in the Bible offers the idea of completion.) Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Then he spins a parable about debts, forgiveness, or lack of forgiveness. The outcome is terrible – for the one who is unforgiving, especially after being forgiven himself. Jesus concludes the telling of the parable with, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

These lessons about despising others, passing judgement on others, of leading from a non-forgiving and hating place in us, should give us pause. We who judge are subject to judgement. This morning’s lessons are calling us to turn away from ways of sin, with sin posited as acting separate and against our neighbors, and acting separately and in opposition to God’s desires for us in relation to him, those around us and even the true God-directed, God-designed self that we were meant to be in God’s world. In particular the parable today shows the power of sin at work in the unforgiving servant’s way of treating another with hatred, injustice, oppression. With God’s help we can turn from the power of sin and turn toward and live fueled by the power of love. Changing old ways, turning towards new life is not easy. It takes intention, motivation, a desire to live differently. And we can’t do it alone; we need and divine help.

Perhaps this morning’s lessons will encourage us to pause, listen closely so that we can choose: to be multipliers of love, not hate, of the way of Jesus, not the way of sin. May our prayer be, as spoken by the psalmist: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Then, by God’s amazing grace, may we become multipliers of grace . . .

*Torrence*