Walking in the Way of Love

From The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
At the Episcopal Church General Convention held in Austin in July 2018, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry announced The Way of Love, an invitation to all to engage in practices for a Jesus-centered life. In this issue of Reflections, we present the seven Way of Love practices. Our writers explore each practice in depth through their own experiences and interpretations. We invite you to join the people and churches of the Diocese of West Texas in engaging in Bishop Curry’s vision for a life lived daily in the presence and awareness of Jesus Christ.

An Invitation from Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry to Practice the Way of Love

I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. – Ephesians 3:17-19

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. But how can we together grow more deeply with Jesus Christ at the center of our lives, so we can bear witness to his way of love in and for the world?

The deep roots of our Christian tradition may offer just such a path. For centuries, monastic communities have shaped their lives around rhythms and disciplines for following Jesus together. Such a pattern is known as a “Rule of Life.” The Way of Love: Practices for Jesus-Centered Life – outlines a Rule for the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.

These practices are designed to be spare and spacious, so that individuals, ministry groups, congregations, and networks can flesh them out in unique ways and build a church-wide treasure trove of stories and resources. There is no specific order you need to follow. If you already keep a Rule or spiritual disciplines, you might reflect and discover how that path intersects with this one. By entering into reflection, discernment and commitment around the practices of Turn - Learn - Pray - Worship - Bless - Go - Rest, I pray we will grow as communities following the loving, liberating, life-giving way of Jesus. His way has the power to change each of our lives and to change this world.

Your brother in the Way of Jesus,

+Michael

The Most Reverend Michael B. Curry, Primate and Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church
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Use this issue as a resource for further study:
Because every issue of Reflections explores a single topic, the magazine lends itself to further study by individuals as well as small groups or Sunday morning classes.

We invite your feedback. If you have comments on this issue or suggestions for future issues, send a note to Marjorie George, editor.
Defaulting

Some of my family members have property on the Llano River, just over the FM 2900 bridge from Kingsland. Except that the 2900 bridge isn’t there any more. On the morning of October 16th, while torrential rains pummeled Central Texas, we watched a news feed out of Austin as it captured video of the bridge going down. Tons of concrete and steel were demolished by the raging river in under 30 seconds.

The river rose 38 feet that day, screaming out of its appointed banks, grabbing boat docks and rider-less jet skis, backyard sheds and centuries-old trees as it hurled on its course. Earlier in the week upstream in Junction it had taken four lives with it.

The communities along the river face months of repair and rebuilding. And not just of buildings and boat docks; but of the courage to go forward even knowing that life can be altered forever by forces beyond our control.

Where do we go when catastrophe slams into our lives? We go to our default. We deal with it by taking the well-worn path of what we know best. Like a car driving down a deeply-rutted dirt road, we take the line of least resistance.

So if prayer is how we start and end every day, we will turn to prayer when danger looms. If it is our habit to help our neighbors out of love for them because that is the example set by Jesus, we will pitch in with love instead of resentment during a crisis. If we are aware of our own shortcomings through frequent acts of self-examination and repentance, we will be inclined to cut others some slack when they disappoint us.

The practices of the Way of Love that is the focus of this issue of Reflections are habit-setting. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry calls them “Practices for Jesus-Centered Life.”

Some of the houses along the Llano river will be stripped to their studs in the rebuilding of that community. All the amenities in those houses – from the choice of doorknobs to the placing of the furniture – will rely on the foundation of that structure.

Whatever we choose as foundational for our own lives becomes ground-zero for all our daily decisions and interactions. "Start as you intend to go," says a friend of mine.

Lord have mercy on all who suffer due to the vicissitudes of this life, and grant us to walk in paths formed from the bedrock recognition of you as Lord of all. Reach Marjorie at marjorie.george@dwtx.org.
The Way of Love: TURN

Pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus.

As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. – Mark 2:14

“Do you turn to Jesus Christ ...?” – Book of Common Prayer, 302

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 reorient our lives to Jesus Christ, falling in love again, again, and again.

from www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

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Whose Turn?

Sometimes I wonder where all the badness in the world originates. So much hatred, lying, devaluing and defrauding. So much sexual harassment and abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, exploitation and manipulation. Where does it all come from? After all, how many people get up in the morning and say, “Today, I think I’ll be on the side of evil. I think I will try to do as much bad as I can do, as much damage as I can manage. Yep. That’s my goal – to be abusive and unjust!”

I doubt many people, if any, think this way. I doubt people set out to be evil or bad to others. Instead, we err by what we don’t see and don’t think, in habits that live outside of our awareness. I have desires, things I want. But I don’t want to admit to being selfish, so I justify those desires – for money, popularity, promotions, romance or whatever – and then get angry at people who get in the way of them. I see the faults of people who are in my way rather than my own faults. I rationalize about myself and what I want while I see the dysfunctions and bad motives in everyone else.

As I drive my car through the city, I determine that people who drive faster than I drive are reckless and crazy, while people who drive slower are public nuisances who waste everyone’s time. All of them are impeding my way – keeping me from driving exactly how I want, exactly where I want. When I check out at the store, I see the person who checks me out slowly as “resentful” or “incompetent” rather than overworked or underappreciated. Arriving home, I sometimes do the same with family, being critical or grumpy or apathetic rather than grateful that someone actually puts up with me, with all my criticism, ingratitude and apathy.

When I think of turning, or of the traditional term “repentance,” I think it must be in reference to these habits of my false or negative self. Repentance, I feel, should involve turning away from such ways. Yet nobody (besides fundamentalists) talks much of repentance these days. To some, the term is too negative, judgmental and condemning. It often comes across as a demand for others to repent. And when it is all about other people’s need to repent, then repentance becomes another form of condemning others and failing to see ourselves. This subtle perversion is not lost on people being told they need to repent. And no one responds well to this.

Jesus called people to repentance, according to the gospels. And yet I sometimes think that Jesus came to call other people to repentance. The truth is, Jesus came to call me to repentance, and not somebody else. Jesus tells me daily to remove the splinter from my own eye so I can truly see others and respond to their fatigue, pain and stress in a way that is helpful. Jesus calls me to come to terms with my own problems, my own tendency to judge, my own failure to love and empathize, to tip over into the negative treatment that other people appear to deserve. Jesus doesn’t call me to judge others, condemn others, or tell them about their flaws.

Repentance is not about them; it’s about me. And the more deeply I can repent, the less I will be taking out my problems on everyone else. The more deeply I can acknowledge that I am the one who is stressed, self-centered and self-justifying, the less I will be swept into hateful and devaluing treatment of others. The more I repent, the more gracious I can be with the faults of others who are just like me. The more I repent, the more I can let go of the never-ending
struggle with God to control the world and get what I want.

As a psychiatrist, I meet every day with people who have made a conscious decision to look at themselves and work on themselves. They have only come to work on themselves because they have stopped blaming everyone else, and stopped pretending that they have life under control. They have come to admit that they have problems like anger, depression, anxiety or addiction. I see such people humbly admit that they are stressed, overwhelmed or weak. But listening to them, I do not pity them. I admire them. I find myself in awe of them, and in awe of the process by which this humble 'confession' results in growth, healing and personal liberation. I also notice how extraordinarily appealing people are without the usual defensiveness and guardedness that characterizes everyday interactions. It is easy to empathize when others are so vulnerable and ready to admit their problems. How good life would be, if we could all live in this mode all of the time.

It seems very straightforward, when put this way. All of us look at our own faults from time to time. We are vaguely aware of them most of the time, and acutely aware of them every once in a while. But it is extraordinarily difficult to maintain an ongoing clear awareness of myself in this way. Instead, I regularly fall into negativity and projection in weak moments of forgetfulness, fatigue and stress. Why is it so hard to be watchful or mindful of myself on a moment-to-moment basis? Why is it even harder to welcome moments of feedback about ways I have been hurtful? I believe it is difficult because it is painful. By painful, I do not mean the kind of pain that goes with guilt and self-hatred. Never have I found those to be helpful in turning and doing better.

I am talking about the simple awareness of myself, warts and all: All of my talents and my limitations, my victories and defeats, my cringe-worthy moments and my greatest hits. It is painful to see the pettiness, self-centeredness, weakness, and lack of courage in myself, even taking all the positives and successes into account. It is a painful process of slowing down, reflecting upon myself, observing myself, grieving myself, and realistically accepting myself, every day. And admitting, as quickly as I can, the ways in which I fail and hurt others, every day. It is a painful, mundane, and privately embarrassing task. And it is the only way I will ever do better. Those who are perfect, after all, can never do better. The perfect have only one alternative: To continually experience the misery of the faults of other people.

For Reflection and Discernment

- What practices help you to turn again and again to Jesus Christ and the Way of Love?
- How will (or do) you incorporate these practices into your rhythm of life?
- Who will be your companion as you turn toward Jesus Christ?

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In 2018 I celebrated my 50th birthday and marked the one-year anniversaries of both my father’s death and Hurricane Harvey. These milestone events have caused me to inhabit a reflective space lately, and I’ve spent the last several months in a season of nostalgia. Sometimes out of the blue I find myself recalling names, faces, and events that happened years ago – many (but not all) of which I remember with great fondness. I wonder often how they all mixed together and turned me into the person I am today.

I’ve been surprised to realize how often my memories play like recorded movies. Some of the most powerful events may be from ten, 20 or 30 years ago, but each time the story in my mind unfolds the same way. I know every scene change by heart, and the set, characters, and soundtrack never change. The fixedness of my memory is familiar and somewhat comforting, and I trust that there are very few surprises or plot twists I have not already explored. I suppose that’s one of the benefits of being both primary script writer and director of my memory movies.

I was recently introduced to David F. Ford’s Theology: A Very Short

The Way of Love: LEARN

Reflect on Scripture each day, especially on Jesus’ life and teachings.

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” – John 14:23

Grant us so to hear [the Holy Scriptures], read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. – Book of Common Prayer, 236

By reading and reflecting on Scripture, especially the life and teachings of Jesus, we draw near to God, and God’s word dwells in us. When we open our minds and hearts to Scripture, we learn to see God’s story and God’s activity in everyday life.

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**Introduction.** In it, he suggests that one of the primary elements of good theological exploration is the “wise and creative retrieval of the past.” He writes, “It says a good deal about a thinker which aspects of the past are given priority . . . But how they are brought into the present with a view to the future is even more significant.” Since I was already in such a nostalgic frame of mind, I found this idea quite interesting. In particular, I thought about myself as script writer and wondered why I tell certain stories of my life in certain ways.

I am not, it should be said, speaking of the kind of intentional reflection that would happen during a theological reflection or conversation with a skillful therapist or spiritual director. Rather, I am thinking of the seemingly mundane memories about the daily ins and outs of my life – those things which seem to be clear and without need of examination. I also generally think of myself as being quite good at asking God for input with current and future events, but it is all too easy to allow memories of experiences and interactions to get fixed and frozen in time. Once that happens, “wise and creative retrieval” is sometimes impossible. I think what I think. I remember what I decide to remember. I know what I allow myself to know.

The end result of this is that I limit God’s input into how I view my experiences. I can be prone to remember things without the benefit of other perspectives. It’s a helpful reminder, then, to learn about all things – what was, what is, and what is yet to be. Over and over we are directed in the Scripture to pursue learning. When we do this we grow in both knowledge and wisdom and, over time, become more like who we were created to be.

As with most things, a commitment to learning must be made with intention. While it can certainly happen on its own, there is nothing which replaces a daily discipline of study and prayer. We always tend to give more time to those things which are priorities for us, and without making a determined commitment we may find that our desires and practices don’t align. There are many ways to stimulate a commitment to learning: engaging in Bible study, enrolling in a class or reflection group, reading scripture regularly. What’s important is that we make the commitment and then – sometimes the hardest part! – we follow up on that commitment.

Consider what areas of your life would benefit from having more of God’s input. Where do your thoughts and feelings seem to be stuck in familiar patterns? What relationships, attitudes, and experiences might God use to teach you something new? By inviting God’s instruction into every aspect of our life we open the door for new possibilities. New wisdom. New creativity. New healing. After all, we may not know as much as we think we do. About anything. Thanks be to God for that!

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**For Reflection and Discernment**

- What ways of reflecting on Scripture are most life-giving for you?
- When will (or do) you set aside time to read and reflect on Scripture in your day?
- With whom will you share in the commitment to read and reflect on Scripture?

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The Way of Love: PRAY

Dwell intentionally with God daily.

_He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”_  
– Luke 11:1

_“Lord, hear our prayer.”_  
– Book of Common Prayer

Jesus teaches us to come before God with humble hearts, boldly offering our thanksgivings and concerns to God or simply listening for God’s voice in our lives and in the world. Whether in thought, word or deed, individually or corporately, when we pray we invite and dwell in God’s loving presence.

from www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

**BFFs**

by Diane Thrush

Prayer is basic to living as a Christian. I learned this many years ago at my mother’s side. The how, why, and what changes as we grow and mature, but the basic structure of our daily walk is prayer. It is a given in following Jesus. What is prayer? It is a conversation with God. It is where we tell God what’s on our minds and give thanks for what we have.
Really? That’s it? Yes. But we make it so much harder than that. We are being called in this new revival of the Way of Love to take prayer back to being “just” prayer – prayer in its most basic form.

I’ve taken courses, read books (so many books), given classes, on and on, and the bottom line remains the same – spending time in prayer daily. Recently I read an article on prayer from Ron Rolheiser, president of Oblate School of Theology, that was life-changing for me. Ron and I are of the same generation, subject to the same foibles and graces of our times, and I resonate with him often. His outlook on prayer was accurate for what I believe will be my last stage of prayer in my journey. My favorite line was, “As I’ve aged I’ve come to realize that being with God in prayer and being with God in my heart is like being with a trusted friend.”

Wow, I have at many stages and phases made prayer such hard work. Trying to do it “right,” But following the “right” formula, right timing, etc. has at many times made prayer exhausting for me. Too often it has been a “should” instead of “want to.” I’ve never wanted to sustain a relationship with a friend composed of should and ought to. Who would want that?

Too often we have tended to look at a rule of life as a discipline with negative connotations. We’ve tended, at least in my generation, to emphasize “rule” as a negative, a forced plan. Jesus isn’t about that! What was that he said about “I have come to bring you life, and life abundantly?” I want more of that in my life, and spending time with a trusted friend brings that.

So, for those of you getting started on this Way of Love forget any stereotypes you may harbor about what prayer is. It is about love and spending time with a trusted friend who brings no rules. Prayer is so much more than intercessory prayer. That is just a piece of the whole. It is about a daily practice that, like anything we do, starts with doing it, repeatedly. Daily prayer is a start, the minimum. I, and many others, have found that praying at the beginning of the day is most helpful. I have always been easily distracted, so if I start my daily routine with prayer, there aren’t as many things that get in the way. If I wait, it’s gone for the day. I am not a morning person, yet if I don’t do it then before I’m distracted, it’s not going to happen.

The Episcopal Church Way of Love website is full of good resources for prayer. There is no one way, to pray, and the Episcopal Church offers many choices. We aren’t bound to one formula or practice of prayer. No matter the form, prayer has truly become a way of life for me over the years.

For Reflection and Discernment

- What intentional prayer practices center you in God’s presence, so you can hear, speak, or simply dwell with God?

- How will (or do) you incorporate intentional prayer into your daily life?

- With whom will you share in the commitment to pray?

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The Way of Love:  
WORSHIP

Gather in community weekly to thank, praise, and dwell with God.

*When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.* – Luke 24:30-31

*Celebrant: Lift up your hearts.*  
*People: We lift them to the Lord.* - Book of Common Prayer, 361

When we worship, we gather with others before God. We hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, give thanks, confess, and offer the brokenness of the world to God. As we break bread, our eyes are opened to the presence of Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are made one body, the body of Christ sent forth to live the Way of Love.

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This past October, Lucy and I celebrated eight years of marriage. Being Lucy's husband is one of the forms of life into which God has led me, and it is through my vocation as her husband that I have learned much of what I know about living a life devoted to worshipping God.

In the marriage service of the 1662 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*, there was no exchanging of rings. The only ring was one the man gave to the woman. After the vows, when it came time for the ring, the man said to the woman, “With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow...”

For the sake of space, I won’t dwell on the problematic gender dynamics evinced in the 1662 marriage rite. Regardless, these words are beautiful and are true of my experience as a husband: “With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow...” The ring is a symbol of a total and unequivocal offering. All my worldly goods, even my body itself—they’re no longer simply mine because I am no longer the center of my universe. My body and my wealth have found a newer, richer home in the presence of one who is not I.

That line, “with my body I thee worship” is probably the sexiest thing ever said in a church outside the Song of Solomon. But those words are not simply about sex. Rather, they acknowledge that we human beings do everything with our bodies: run errands, fold laundry, wash dishes, walk the dog. Marriage places new disciplines and demands upon us. These disciplines and demands change our physical experience of the world. I wash dishes I didn’t dirty; I fold clothes I don’t wear; I try to go to bed and rise when Lucy does; I no longer ride scooters after dark because it’s dangerous.

This is no less true of “all my worldly goods.” None of my paycheck is simply mine; it’s ours. My stipend as the vicar of St. Elizabeth is our only income, yet Lucy (who is a full-time student) need not ask before buying a book or getting a haircut. The mutual commitment of worldly goods made in our marriage precedes either of our income status. On payday, I don’t “give Lucy my money.” I’m not giving Lucy...

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“my” money because that category has been subsumed by our sacramental relationship: it’s all already hers, too.

As a spouse, I order my embodied life and material resources so as to acknowledge, and even proclaim, the worthiness of Lucy’s desires. Her desires are a gift to me, as is their unique claim on my life. They safeguard me from the illusion that I am the center of my own universe.

We can finally begin to see how these words from the 1662 marriage rite might be instructive for worship, not just for husbands but for any Christian person.

To worship God is to acknowledge God’s worthiness and the worthiness of God’s desires. As our creator, God’s worthiness is absolute. To worship God is to ascribe ultimate worth to our Creator. (The words worship and worth have the same root.) When we acknowledge the worthiness of God, when we worship God, God’s desires begin to lay upon us new gifts, new disciplines and demands.

God’s desires are essentially two, and they constitute a total claim: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). This claim is also unique: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). We believe that God, the Father of Jesus, is our God. We forsake all others.

Therefore, our bodies and worldly goods are no longer simply our own. We kneel in prayer; we use words instead of fists when angry; we listen to each other; we visit the sick; we offer each other food and affection; we receive this bread and this wine; we open our home for small group; we pledge financially to our church. All of these are ways we acknowledge the worthiness of God’s desires – ascribing ultimate worth to our Creator with our bodies and worldly goods, receiving as gifts the disciplines and demands of living in God’s presence.

The truth that we belong to God precedes every other decision: should I have this surgery, should I travel to see this family member, can we really afford to tithe? Our bodies and our worldly goods are always already God’s property. God’s desires are determinative.

It’s no wonder that the Eucharist involves so much physical engagement and so many objects. We bow during the procession as the cross passes. We offer money and bread and wine on the altar. God gives us the body of His Son. Even the simple act of praying in words we have not written ourselves acknowledges the truth that Christ’s commitment to the Church, and our vocation as Christians, precedes our every decision, even our speech.

Not long ago the bishop visited us on Sunday morning at St. Elizabeth. We witnessed several confirmations, receptions, and reaffirmations. All of us renewed our baptismal covenants. We promised to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” We promised to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” We promised to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” We promised to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.”

These are not little promises. It’s as though we all looked at God and said, “with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow….”
Powerful vows. Imagine God’s pleasure, God’s Divine Joy, at having the promise of your whole life glittering on the gentle finger of heaven. Imagine your own unending joy, for as long as you both shall live, the life everlasting.

For Discernment and Reflection

- What communal worship practices move you to encounter God and knit you into the body of Christ?
- How will (or do) you commit to regularly worship?
- With whom will you share the commitment to worship this week?

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In our common life, we are shaped by these words at the beginning of our celebrations of Holy Eucharist: “Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” And by the response: “And blessed be God’s kingdom, now and forever.”

We begin with blessing, because God’s first action is to bring forth life. That is who God is: the blessed Trinity who continually, eternally, brings forth life out of death.

Blessing is at the center of our worship and at the core of our Christian vocation. We are called to be agents of blessing and to

The Way of Love: BLESS

Share faith and unselfishly give and serve.

“Freely you have received; freely give.” – Matthew 10:8

Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People: We will, with God’s help. – Book of Common Prayer, 305

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. We can share our stories of blessing and invite others to the Way of Love.

from www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove
be communities that bless our neighbors. When we fail to do this – well, that’s what is called sin. Martin Luther used to say that sin is characterized by “being turned in upon oneself.” In other words, the opposite of blessing.

It is helpful to remember that the English word “bless” comes from an Old English word meaning “blood.” Blessing is deeply linked to circulating life – just as blood circulates through all of the vessels of a living body. In the case of the Christian community, we are called – indeed commanded – to circulate the life of Christ in particular ways, right where we live and move and have our being.

In this way of life, “bless” is being used as an active verb. So when we bless, we are living in such a way that we are offering concrete aid and hope and kindness to those who stand in need. We are schooled in spontaneous generosity and open-handed care. Sometimes this looks like sharing funds or labor. Sometimes it’s a matter of tutoring a child who is struggling to read. Or maybe it’s gathering as a parish and deciding to notice the neighbors who live across the block, and discovering what their needs might be. When we bless, we remember that we are made in the image and likeness of God. When we bless, we look beyond our own needs. We recognize that we have been extravagantly loved and cherished by the living Christ, and that hoarding that blessing is not going to bring joy.

Some years ago at diocesan council, Bishop Robert Hibbs, now of blessed memory, ended a sermon by telling the delegates that we Christians are called to “slather the world with blessing.” In his typical folksy, deeply incarnational manner, Bob encouraged us to remember that we are always being invited to circulate the Gift of God in Christ, dwelling with us and within us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Slathering takes many forms. And slathering is, by its very nature, about abundance. (Just think of really good butter, or rich chocolate icing on a cake.)

In recent months, as I’ve read of the various ministries of our tiniest congregations and the largest ones, I’ve noticed the many ways these Episcopal communities are blessing others. Through ministries of offering food, school supplies, computer tutoring, home building, language skills, pastoral needs, tending to the suffering and the dying, we live out the blessing that we have received. The slathering makes our own lives into sacraments. In the words of St. Augustine of Hippo, we become what we have received. As the Body of the Living Christ, aided by prayers and intercessions of those who have gone before, we turn toward both our neighbors and toward the aching world. We put down superficial differences and acrimonies. We remember that we hand on what we receive: the blessing of the Holy One. And we watch for those opportunities to slather the world with blessing, delighting in the ways in which living members of the Body of Christ are called to live this life of blessing.

“For Discernment and Reflection

- What are the ways the Spirit is calling you to bless others?

- How will (or does) blessing others – through sharing your resources, faith, and story – become part of your daily life?

- Who will join you in committing to the practice of blessing others?

Mary is a retired priest, author, and retreat leader. Her latest book is Marvelously Made: Gratefulness and the Body, available from Church Publishing, and from Amazon. Reach Mary at mcearle48@gmail.com.
The Way of Love: GO

Cross boundaries, listen deeply and live like Jesus.

*Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”* – John 20:21

*Send them into the world in witness to your love.* – Book of Common Prayer, 306

As Jesus went to the highways and byways, he sends us beyond our circles and comfort, to witness to the love, justice, and truth of God with our lips and with our lives. We go to listen with humility and to join God in healing a hurting world. We go to become Beloved Community, a people reconciled in love with God and one another.

from www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove
A few months ago, I came across a common Middle Eastern fable that has made me think twice before saying “let me know if you need anything.” Speaking gently and with grace during coffee hour or on the way to the parking lot after work, we so often use those words as a genuine offer to help someone during their time of need.

The subtext seems clear: we want to help. We’ll come over and clean their house. Watch their kids or walk their dogs. Make our best chicken pot pie. The offer is there — but the first part of the phrase, “let me know,” puts an undue burden on the person in need.

The fable describes a man who has fallen into a river. Caught in the currents, he fights to tread water as a crowd comes into view. On the riverbank, each member of the crowd urgently shouts to the drowning man over the roaring water, “Give me your hand! Give me your hand!”

But the man instead keeps treading water. He slips beneath the surface and pops back up, struggling to take a breath. He peddles his feet feverishly, trying to keep his chin above the waves.

Then another man comes to the riverbank and sees the drowning man. He calmly wades into the water, looks at the drowning man, and says, “Take my hand.” Together, the two come out of the river. The rescued man looks relieved as he sits on the riverbank, breathing heavily.

The crowd turns toward the rescuer, confused. “How were you able to reach him, when he didn’t heed our plea?”

The man explains, “You all asked him for something — his hand. I offered him something — my hand. A drowning man is in no position to give you anything.”

Maybe you love someone who is in the middle of a season of heartache, disillusion, confusion, or despair. Maybe you want to protect them or help them bear the load, but you’re afraid of doing the wrong thing. You want to give them their space. So you say, “let me know if you need anything.”

I’m right there with you. When my friend’s toddler was diagnosed with a life-limiting genetic disorder, I didn’t go to her. I went to Google. Can you imagine? She is my most treasured friend on the planet, and instead of calling her, I used my smartphone to search “What to do for a friend who has a special needs child?” Just like that, a stranger’s blog confirmed what the Holy Spirit urges us all to do for those who are struggling: I needed to go to her.

She was drowning, and there I was waiting for her or someone else to tell me what to do to help her. I needed to get into the river with her and offer her my hand. I couldn’t rescue her from the pain of that diagnosis. I couldn’t “fix” anything. But I could go to her.

As I try to incorporate the “Go!” command into my rule of life, our post-communion prayer serves as a weekly reminder that the act of going is intimately tied to the work God has given us to do.

So I pray that I will build into my life a commitment to push past the comfortable distance we sometimes put between ourselves and the struggles other people face. That I will listen carefully and with humility to join God at work in healing a hurting world. That I won’t wait until I’ve come up with the perfect response — that I will trust the Holy Spirit’s promptings, love how Jesus loves, and go to those who are hurting.

Will you consider doing the same?

For Discernment and Reflection

- To what new places or communities is the Spirit sending you to witness to the love, justice, and truth of God?

- How will you build into your life a commitment to cross boundaries, listen carefully, and take part in healing and reconciling what is broken in this world?

- With whom will you share in the commitment to go forth as a reconciler and healer?
The Way of Love: REST

Receive the gift of God's grace, peace, and restoration.

_Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid._ – John 14:27

_Blessed are you, O Lord ... giving rest to the weary, renewing the strength of those who are spent._ – Book of Common Prayer, 113

From the beginning of creation, God has established the sacred pattern of going and returning, labor and rest. Especially today, God invites us to dedicate time for restoration and wholeness - within our bodies, minds, and souls, and within our communities and institutions. By resting we place our trust in God, the primary actor who brings all things to their fullness.

Just Accept It

by Julie Raymond Chalk
In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to us, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (11:28).

Perhaps this is the most well-known quotation in all of Scripture regarding God’s invitation to rest. Who among us, especially when feeling undue stress, has not invoked this verse as the promise of our dreams – indeed, as a prayer for relief from our exhaustion! We have all experienced times in our lives that were marked by heightened responsibilities, increased pressure, and seemingly endless demands on our time, our bodies, and our souls. This promise from Jesus can be the relief for which our spirits long and our bodies crave.

The Way of Love challenges us to embrace rest as a critical part of our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives by “receiving the gift of God’s grace, peace, and restoration.” While God’s grace, peace, and restoration are amazing things I want in my life, I find that the challenging part of this definition is in the word “receive.” Yes, God has promised us the most wonderful gifts that we could imagine (and even those we can’t) – gifts that not just help us in our daily lives, but gifts that provide a richness to our lives and relationships that we couldn’t possibly imagine. Why is receiving them sometimes so very difficult?

When we consider the opposite of the word “rest,” we think about words like weariness, stress, tiredness, undue demands, and exhaustion. Instead, I would like to suggest that the opposite of rest is actually resistance – resistance to God’s gifts, God’s provision, and God’s will and/or plan for our lives. I have found that rest isn’t as much about getting caught up on sleep or taking a vacation or delegating some of our responsibilities (though it may include these things), as it is about surrender – surrendering to what IS, accepting what is happening, and trusting that God is in control. Only when we can surrender and trust, can we then actually receive God’s gifts of grace, peace, and restoration that the Way of Love talks about.

Years ago my family planned a trip to Monhegan Island, about 12 miles off the coast of Maine. It’s known for its cliffs, forests, picturesque harbor and village, and exquisite scenery. We had chosen the perfect summer day and had arrived at the ferry dock with plenty of time to spare. The “ferry” was actually a smallish mail boat, and, because I have a long history of motion sickness, I had taken my medication to preclude becoming sick on board.

Because of the beautiful weather, we hadn’t anticipated the high seas, and I started to feel sick as soon as we got out of the harbor and onto the open ocean, despite taking my medication. Of course, everyone has lots of suggestions when a companion is turning green around the gills: “Look at the horizon! Stand in the bow! Keep the wind in your face! For heaven’s sake, don’t go inside to use the restroom – you’ll just feel sicker!” I tried to follow all of this advice, but just became more ill, losing my breakfast, and miserable until I set foot on the island.

We had a glorious visit, with a beautiful hike through the woods, a picnic on the rocks, and vistas exceeding our expectations; however, my day had a dark undercurrent of dread as I knew that I would have to get back on that boat to return to the mainland (possibly the longest 95 minutes of my life). When the time came, and I climbed aboard for the return trip, all of my seasickness returned in full force. In my heart I cried out to God for relief. What I heard was, “Surrender, give in to the waves, relax.” With God’s help, I was able to do just that. Instead of staring at the horizon fighting every wave that we cut through, I let go. I started to feel the up and down of each wave, becoming one with the vessel. I closed my eyes and allowed my body to accept the movement I found myself previously only enduring. While the lightheadedness remained, the nausea gradually dissipated, and I was able to get back to shore with much greater ease and peace in my soul and body.

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When God calls us to rest, I believe that this surrender, this giving up the fight with our surroundings, this letting go of the resistance to the challenges in our lives, is what He is calling us to do.

Matthew 11 continues with the words in verses 29-30, “Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light” (Today's English Version). I would guess that most of us have felt that the load we find ourselves carrying doesn't often seem light, and the yoke around our necks certainly doesn't feel easy. For many years I believed that the yoke described here is the yoke worn by one person with a heavy bucket hanging from each of the yoke's wooden arms. Later I realized that the yoke mentioned may actually be the kind used by a pair of oxen, where the load is shared with someone else. Perhaps when we do share this yoke with Christ, we find our loads lighter and our burdens easier. Indeed, verse 29 promises that we WILL find rest if we take (accept, surrender to, release ourselves to) God's yoke (His will and plan for our lives). “By resting, we place our trust in God, the primary actor who brings all things to their fullness.” (The Way of Love)

I recently experienced an unexpected month-long illness during which activity became impossible and rest became essential to my treatment and recovery. I found myself resenting this unanticipated intrusion into my plans and routine and resisting the need to surrender to the situation. God reminded me of my trip to Monhegan Island and the need to let go, to allow myself to experience what was happening in my body, and to accept things just as they were, “riding the wave,” if you will. Only then could I get better. Indeed, only then, could I “receive the gift of God's grace, peace, and restoration,” as the Way of Love calls us to do.

Julie Chalk is a social worker who lives in Canyon Lake and attends St. Francis by the Lake. She is also one of the facilitators for Community of Hope in her parish. Reach her at jfrchalk@gmail.com.

For Discernment and Reflection

- What practices restore your body, mind, and soul?

- How will you observe rest and renewal on a regular basis?

- With whom will you commit to create and maintain a regular practice of rest?
Growing a Rule of Life

by Syvia Maddox

The Christian life is a Way of Life. Thomas Merton said, “The spiritual life is first of all a life.” A rule of Life is a light on the way – a balance, a holding together, a pattern, a form, a foundation, a way of living consciously.

A Rule of Life becomes an environment in which we live, struggle, and survive. It is like the trellis that supports a vine, guiding it in the direction it is meant to grow.

A Rule starts from a commitment, a desire for conversion, a longing to follow a deeper call of discipleship, a “school for conversion.” The call is to one’s true self, to the high calling, to union with Christ. First we need an inner Rule. First should be a desire for the goal, the crown, the quest – not a desire for a Rule, but a commitment to Jesus Christ, much like the Baptismal Covenant.

Why keep a Rule? Because no matter how deep our desires, how much fire we feel at times in our faith, we are all susceptible to our culture, our personalities, our abilities, and the unforeseen circumstances of life. We need something that will hold us together in the dry times, in the chaos, and in tandem with our own emotions and plans.

A Rule of Life should contain our intention. Areas of concern should be our prayer life (both public and private), communal worship, study, service, relationships, and our body.

In this way we start to see the sacramentality of our time and always having before us a holy purpose. We don’t look at things as obligations but as part of the working out of our own salvation consciously. Knowing that our failure is the last word. As the monks said, “We fall down, and we get up.”

My own Rule of Life came into being in the late 1970s in a time of spiritual exploration. Faith Alive, the Charismatic Experience, Cursillo were all active movements of the time. I started reading great spiritual writers like William Temple, Henri Nouwen, Agnes Sanford, Thomas Merton, and Teresa of Avila. I was ready to make a deeper commitment, having made

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a vow in 1975 “to be true” to what I really believed. A friend talked to me about the Order of the Holy Cross. I knew nothing then about orders or St. Benedict or Rules. These worlds did not come up as they do today.

I began a year’s practice to be an Associate of the Order of the Holy Cross. This was a big commitment as most of my friends were still 60s leftovers, ambivalent about the church and especially those who seemed overly religious. The Rule of the Order called me to do things I had never done before. I went on my first private retreat in 1980. I fasted during Lent. I found a spiritual director; I opened each day with short morning prayers. At the end of the year, my desire to be close to Christ was strengthened. And so it has been every year I have been on this path.

Every year I renew my vows and offer a special prayer on the Feast of the Holy Cross. It is not the Order of the Holy Cross that means so much to me, however; it is the way that it has provided for me to go deeper into the Christian life.

My rule is this:

Prayer: Daily Office, journaling, blessing prayers, intercession. Two retreats a year. Setting aside time to be in God’s creation.

Study: not regulated because my work teaching spiritual formation is so much study.

Family: Attention to my husband, sons, and extended family. I try to be present to their physical and emotional needs as well as create times of celebration.

Worship: Eucharist every Sunday and mid-week at University of the Incarnate Word where I teach. Special intentions at Oblate Seminary grotto. A deeper asceticism during Lent. Designated time with a prayer partner.

Community: Ministry in my church as a lector, Lay Eucharistic Minister, and intercessor. Ministry to the community through the boards of Santa Rosa Children’s Hospital and United Communities of San Antonio. Ministry to the needy through serving breakfast monthly at the SAMM Shelter and serving as chaplain to The Visitation House.

Hospitality: Offering our home and guesthouse for those who need retreats, seminary students, and out-of-town guests. Hosting celebrations and gatherings for family, friends, and those who do not have access to a large home.

Stewardship: Tithing 20 percent of our income. Taking care of my body by exercise, nutrition, music, and fun.

Mission: Focusing on those on the margins of faith as students at UIW. Ministry of encouragement in teaching in various churches and ecumenical settings.

This is not unlike my childhood Rule which I have come to realize shaped my desire and understanding of a Rule of Life. I am grateful for the Girls’ Auxiliary in the Baptist Church where I learned the value of dedication in ways that gave my life purpose and means to live out that purpose:

Abide in Him in through prayer
Advance in Wisdom by Bible study
Acknowledge my stewardship
Adorn myself with Good Works
Accept the challenge of the Great Commission.

Sylvia Maddox is a writer and educator. She is a member of Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio TX. Reach her at sylmaddox@aol.com.
How will you or your church, ministry, or network commit to following the Way of Jesus? How could you join or gather a community for practicing a Jesus-centered life?

Get inspired by viewing the comprehensive set of resources gathered from across the church. Develop your own resources, campaigns, and pathways for living The Way of Love -- as individuals, ministry groups, congregations, dioceses, and networks. Take part in the church-wide movement. Share your stories and resources.

from the Way of Love brochure, available for downloading and printing from www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

From The Episcopal Church Way of Love website
www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

• A video invitation from Bishop Michael Curry
• A complete nine-week curriculum for small-group study
• Discernment and Reflection guides
• Print-ready materials: brochure, wallet cards in English and Spanish
• Covenant and commitment short liturgy
• Rule of Life book resources
• Four-week Advent study
• Print resources for each practice

From Forma, Christian Formation network
www.forma.church/way-of-love

• Eight propers that can be used as a framework for small group gatherings, Evening Prayer, dedicated Sundays, or at any time during the year.
• Way of Love bulletin insert
• Way of Love catcher
• Way of Love Back to School resources

From Church Publishing
www.churchpublishing.org/wayoflove

A series of seven Little Books of Guidance, designed for you to discover how following certain practices can help you follow Jesus more fully in your daily life. One book on each of the seven Way of Love practices. Cost is around $7 each.

Live the Way of Love during Advent.
Download an Advent calendar along with a four-week Advent curriculum from www.episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADVENT CALENDAR</th>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Worship Advent 1</td>
<td>Pay attention during worship. What part of the service felt close to you?</td>
<td>2 Go</td>
<td>Take time to listen closely to someone you may not ordinarily take seriously or who has a different perspective than you.</td>
<td>3 Learn</td>
<td>Read Luke 1:38-50. Tell a story or family story that inspires your practice of the Way of Love and listen to what you.</td>
<td>4 Pray</td>
<td>Pray for a move of love, implicitly using this proper: “Dear Lord Jesus.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Worship Advent 2</td>
<td>What word or words from worship today have been a home in your heart? Share with someone close to you.</td>
<td>8 Go</td>
<td>Choose to take a different route to work, school, or to play today. Who or what did you encounter differently?</td>
<td>10 Learn</td>
<td>Read Luke 1:19-38. Tell a story or family story that inspires your practice of the Way of Love and listen to what you.</td>
<td>12 Pray</td>
<td>Pray for a move of love, implicitly using this proper: “Dear Lord Jesus.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Worship Advent 3</td>
<td>Pray for each person in your life who comes to your mind. Who or what do you wish to see at church next week? Invite them to church today.</td>
<td>17 Go</td>
<td>Read or watch a random resource. Where is your mind at this moment? Pray for healing.</td>
<td>18 Learn</td>
<td>Read Luke 1:26-38. Pray with your faith community and listen to what you.</td>
<td>19 Pray</td>
<td>Pray with your faith community for healing today or tomorrow.</td>
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The 115th Diocesan Council of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas will take place in McAllen, February 21-23, 2019. Hosts are the Episcopal Churches of the Upper Valley: St. John’s, McAllen; St. Peter and St. Paul, Mission; Grace, Weslaco; Trinity, Pharr; and St. Matthew’s, Edinburg.

The theme for this year echoes The Way of Love: “Walk in love as Christ loved us” from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians (5:2). The passage challenges us to remember our Baptismal Covenant and “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” It reminds us that love is not merely a disposition or sentiment of the heart, but also an active way of being in the world.

For details of Council as they develop www.council-dwtx.org

Diocesan council 2019

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Registration for all events is online, opening December 21

Youth in Action, for young people in grades 6-12 and their sponsors: Friday evening through Sunday morning: at St. John’s, McAllen.

Pre-council meetings

Eastern Convocation - Sunday, Jan. 20
Grace, Cuero: 4-6pm (note the time)

Western Convocation - Tuesday, Jan. 22
St. Philip’s, Uvalde: 6-8pm

Northeastern Convocation - Thursday, Jan. 24
St. John’s, New Braunfels: 6-8pm

Valley Convocation - Sunday, Jan. 27
St. Andrew’s, Port Isabel: 6-8pm

Southern Convocation - Monday, Jan. 28
St. Bartholomew’s, Corpus Christi: 6-8pm

Northern Convocation - Thursday, Jan. 31
St. Barnabas, Fredericksburg: 6-8pm

Central Convocation - Monday, Feb. 4
St. Luke’s, San Antonio: 6:15-8:15pm

Council highlights
All events at the McAllen Convention Center

Thursday, February 21
10:00 am Council Prayer Room opens
Exhibits and Hospitality opens
Lay & Clergy Registration

11:00 am Childcare opens
11:15 am Christian Formation Luncheon
1:00 pm Business Session Convenes
4:45 pm Business Session recesses
5:30 pm Council Eucharist
7:30 pm Small Church, Big Mission Dinner

7:30 pm Evening on your own

Friday, February 22
8:00 am Morning Prayer
8:45 am Business Session resumes
11:45 am Business session recesses
12:00 pm Bishops’ Luncheon, Speaker the Rt. Rev. Daniel Gutierrez
12:00 pm Clergy Spouse Luncheon
1:50 pm Business Session resumes
6:45 pm Council Banquet (reception 6 p.m.)

Saturday, February 23
9:00 am Business Session resumes with Youth in Action commissioning
1:00 pm Council ADJOURNS

Reflections – Fall/Winter 2018
A Graceful Invitation

by Bishop David Reed

W hen I think about practices I realize that mine currently seem to be grounded in extending grace. Giving people a break, extending kindness, trying to get into the other person’s shoes and see what’s behind what they are doing that is making me crazy. I am pretty sure that I am focused on extending grace because I need people to extend grace to me.

This is a mean time in the life of our country. We are in a pattern of assuming the worst of people and ascribing terrible motivations to others. The atmosphere invades our lives and our relationships. It is a time when we need to be called back to the “way of love” that Jesus taught us.

The seven practices the Presiding Bishop has laid before us give us a structure that is intentional for doing that but also, as he says in his invitation (see page 2), “spare and spacious.”

In the image of the wheel and cross, each of the practices has a broad entry point leading to the middle. So there are multiple ways to encounter each practice, all leading to the same point, which is Christ. All of the practices lead to a crossroads, so we can go from one to another in no order. They are all connected and related. We can’t do one without the others.

But none of us is going to engage with all of the practices with the same intensity at the same time. It’s natural that one practice will speak to me more than another at a particular season of my life. Right now I am enjoying a particular Bible study because it is one I am not leading and is not in preparation for my Sunday sermon. I can engage with it in a different way from when it is my job.

The Way of Love is also a graceful invitation to self-examination that leads us to look at the areas of our spiritual life we might not be addressing. We might find in self-examination that we are not spending enough time in prayer; on the other hand, we might find that we are going to too many retreats and not spending enough time serving Christ in others.

We don’t adopt a set of practices, a Rule of Life, to get better at the practices. It is never about counting how many people we have blessed, how many hours a day we spend reading the Bible, or even how many times a month we go to church. It is always about growing in our relationship with Christ. And it is from that relationship that we engage the world and become more intentional about remembering and practicing how Christ calls us to live in the world. 

The Rt. Rev. David Reed is Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas.

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It doesn’t have to end like this . . .

Reflections continues online at www.reflections-dwtx.org