



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 5
Year C

The Way of Love

[RCL]: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

With these eleven words, Jesus turns the world order upside-down—in first-century Palestine and here, today.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

Jesus tells us that everyone will know we are his disciples if we have love for one another. And it sounds quite simple, doesn't it? Just love.

Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love your enemy. Love your spouse. Love your friend. Love your bus driver, your mailman, your pharmacist. Love everybody. Just love.

Now, some of that may be harder than other parts, right? Like, “Love your enemy.” But the overall gist: love—that's something we can affirm. Love is the answer.

As St. Paul tells us, love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). If love can do all that, it really is the answer. So, if love is the answer, what is the question?

To find that out, let's take some advice from our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. Yes, that guy who made quite a splash preaching at the royal wedding, just over a year ago today. Bishop Curry has a wonderful way of branding us as “the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement.” That movement is loving, liberating, and life-giving, he tells us. And being part of it is much, much more than simply having our name written in a record book or supporting the church financially. It is a way of life, a practice for spiritual growth.

In fact, he calls this spiritual discipline “the Way of Love.”¹ In this way, we seek love. We seek freedom. We seek abundant life. We seek Jesus.

Let's go over those, one by one, in reverse order.

¹ Quoting somewhat liberally from *The Way of Love* materials, found online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love>.
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First, we seek Jesus. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life—and by choosing to follow him, we join forces with the power to change lives and to change the world for good. And it is a choice, made not just once in a lifetime, but over and over again.

By seeking Jesus, we are seeking abundant life. Not riches, or power, or status—but a life overflowing with joy, peace, generosity, and delight. A life of meaning, given back to God and lived for others.

Second, to make this possible, we are seeking freedom. Not just the freedoms guaranteed us by a constitution, but true freedom—from the powers of fear, sin, oppression, and division. These “powers that be” pull us from living as God created us to be: dignified, whole, and free.

And third, free from those powers, we are seeking love. To know God’s love, to love and be loved by others, and to love ourselves. You can find out much more about the Way of Love online at www.episcopalchurch.org.

But in case you are not convinced by Jesus, Michael Curry, and this sermon, here’s a bit of evidence from the scientific world. This insight comes from the *TED Radio Hour*, broadcast on National Public Radio.² The episode was called “How Things Spread,” and it started by noting how laughter spreads.

Laughter is contagious. Someone laughs, and we start to laugh, too—sometimes without even knowing what is so funny! And laughter spreads because we are connected to each other, part of social networks, in relationship. We humans fare better—and sometimes worse—because we are all connected to others.

But the benefits of living a connected life outweigh the costs. If someone was always violent toward you, or gave you misinformation, or made you sad, or infected you with deadly germs—you would cut the ties to that person, and your network would disintegrate. So, the spread of good and valuable things is necessary to sustain and nourish social networks, our system of relationships. Social networks are fundamentally related to goodness. And they are necessary for spreading ideas, kindness, altruism, happiness, and love. And a network that’s arranged one way can be healthy, innovative, cooperative, and kind. But, arranged another way—well, you get the idea.

The idea is based on our choosing the Way of Love—on our choosing to be together in Christian community. And on our choosing to imagine a future in which all of God’s beloved children have enough food to eat, a shelter in which to sleep, and sufficient clothes to wear. Imagining a future in which health care is a God-given right for every individual, not a scheme to make some people very, very rich at the expense of those who are very, very sick. A future in which everyone receives a quality education, not a system of disparity that grows ever greater. A future in which all people are allowed and nurtured to become all who God created them to be—women, men, people of color, queer folks, people whose ancestors came from other lands, you name it.

And all of this based on the Way of Love, that powerful, convincing, and benign mythological structure. Oh, not *myth*, as in “untruth.” But *myth* as in a powerful story that communicates truth, but may not actually be

² Guy Raz, “How Things Spread,” *TED Radio Hour* on National Public Radio, originally broadcast 4 March 2016.

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factual. Like the creation story, which communicates an essential truth: God created. In fact, God created out of the dust, from nothing. And the most powerful lesson from the creation story may not be about how many 24-hour days it took, but about having “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). We used to think that meant we could despoil the earth, we could plunder whatever we wanted, we could squander our precious resources—but we are coming to see it as a command to be better stewards of our island home.

Because that is what the Way of Love has shown us.

And we used to think slavery was a God-given institution, and we could kidnap people, rip them from their families and their homeland, and oppress them all the days of their lives—but we have come to see that we need to have respect for all human beings.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is right.

We used to think that our privilege and our success were signs of God’s favor, allowing us to condemn others less fortunate for not pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps—but we have to see that same privilege and success as a means of empowering us to lift up the lowly.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is good.

We used to think that women were to keep silent and cover their heads in church, and this led to their treatment as second-class citizens, inferior to men—but we have to see that God has created us all in the divine image, of equal and immeasurable value.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is just.

We used to believe a lot of things, things that caused us to oppress others, to disparage those different from ourselves, to ignore the refugee and stranger, to be fearful of the unknown—but we have turned from those sinful ways.

Because the Way of Love has shown us what is true.

And we do all this, walking in the Way of Love, knowing, deep in our heart, that we are doing the will of God. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

And we are doing our best to do just that.

Because in this Way of Love, we come to know God’s love, to love and be loved by others, and to love ourselves. Amen.

Now retired, Barrie Bates has served Episcopal and Lutheran congregations in California, New York, and New Jersey over the past 20+ years. He holds a Ph.D. in liturgical studies and serves on the General Board of Examining Chaplains. He looks forward to spending more time on the shores of Lake Michigan, and he welcomes conversation about his sermons.

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