



The Bishop's Address to the 117th Diocesan Convention
The Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts
October 27, 2018

Almost every diocese wants Michael Curry to come for a Revival. How did we get so high up on his list? After all, only five other dioceses had a Revival before us. Some might think it is because Michael and I share a common love of basketball and we have the Hall of Fame. But what really sealed the deal was the pitch we made to Michael's staff that this is the place where another great Revival occurred 285 years ago in Northampton. It was called the Great Awakening. Why not return to the area where the Great Awakening began? And they agreed.

Many of you know about the Great Awakening from high school history. The most famous preacher of the time was Jonathan Edwards, a Congregational minister who took on the church in Northampton as a missionary to the frontier lands. Yes, Northampton was the frontier. He preached salvation by grace and total dependence on God's infinite mercy. His preaching style was later called "hellfire and brimstone."

Here's just one example. He preached a sermon about that gospel passage we had from Mark just a few weeks ago. You know that one about "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." And then Jesus mentions other body parts that may need to go. And then describes hell as the place "where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched." Now I know you all heard some great sermons on that from our wonderful WMA clergy and lay preachers. Here's what the Great Awakening preacher had to say about that:

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like a fire. He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire. Yet it is nothing but God's hand that holds you from falling into the fire at that very moment."

Edwards went on like that for two hours on a Sunday morning. And the people loved it! They came back for two more hours that afternoon. Edwards' theology and style of preaching spread to other churches throughout New England and to a lesser extent throughout the North American colonies. People went to churches in droves to hear this. The Great Awakening.

Our Revival was a little different than the Great Awakening. Michael Curry's style is certainly different than Jonathan Edwards. As is his theology. Michael told us "if it is not about love, it is not about God!" He quotes Martin Luther King Jr, who said "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear." And Michael expanded on that to say that the opposite of love, isn't really hate. It is selfishness in all its forms. And building on the theology of Pierre

Teilhard de Chardin, Michael proclaimed as only he can:

“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. Love is the only way!”

We had a great weekend. What’s next? Here is wisdom from a letter that a man named Cyprian sent to his friends around the year 100 A.D.

“The world can be a mean and cruel place. But here in Rome there is a small group of people who care about each other. They give whatever it takes to help one another in need. And they seem very happy living this way. They call themselves Christian. I think I will join them and try this way for a while.”

Christianity is not an idea. It is not a philosophy. It is a way of living. At all his Revivals, Michael Curry promotes a rule of life called “The Way of Love.” It has seven parts. Pray. Worship. Learn. Rest. Turn. Bless. Go.

I’m going to devote the rest of this Convention Address to The Way of Love because I think it is an invitation coming to us from the Holy Spirit.

PRAY. This is my seventh Convention address to our holy and wonderful diocese. The biggest reaction I ever received was to a story I told about my mom and prayer. It might be worth repeating here. My mom died way too young forty years ago at the age of 47. When my sister was going through her things, she found her nurses handbook and my sister took out the first two pages and had them framed. Betsy and I have it in our dining room.

The first page is a novena. It is a prayer to be said every hour for nine straight hours. You see my mom was very, very Roman Catholic. Here is part of it:

“O Jesus, who hast said ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you, through the intercession of Mary, thy most Holy Mother, I knock, I seek, I ask that my prayer be granted.”

Then it says “make your request.” I am sure my mom had a whole variety of prayer requests but when I was very young they probably included “please slow down my son as he runs from place to place and please protect him when he keeps jumping off high things.”

Then the prayer continues with two more paragraphs, each followed by “make your request here.”

The point of this is the regularity and the discipline. Say this prayer every hour for nine hours. In the midst of a very busy life, that is a big commitment. Part of The Way of Love is to make a commitment to daily prayer; however we choose to do it, in our busy lives. Not to get all Jonathan Edwards, Great Awakening on you, but we pray to know whose hands we are in. To know to whom we belong. To know, as Thomas Merton said, our God “who is Mercy, within Mercy, within Mercy.”

I told you my sister had the first two pages of my mother’s prayer journal framed. The second page, directly opposite the novena, is the Prayer of St. Francis. “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love, where there is injury pardon.”

You see my mom got that prayer is a prelude to action. “Thoughts and prayers” has become a cliché and a copout for not doing anything when the issues of our times need to be addressed. More about that later.

WORSHIP. Jesus was so clear about this. “Get two or three together and I’ll be there.” Some very sincere folks can be “spiritual but not religious.” But following Jesus means religiously showing up to be with others before the Living God. Faith means faithfulness. Everyone in this hall gets that.

Our General Convention this past summer voted for a liturgical renewal throughout the Church. We are encouraged to develop new prayers that speak to how we know God through the ages and how we know God now. Prayers that help all people feel a sense of belonging. Prayers that praise God for the expanse and diversity of God’s creation. Prayers that inspire and console.

Thomas Merton said that when we deal with God, we are necessarily in over our head. Of course our forms of prayer will change over time. I love the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. I think God does too. But I don’t think God ever said “this is it. You got me perfectly. No need to ever expand on this.”

I look forward to hearing from you about liturgical renewal in your congregations, so we might share the wisdom.

LEARN. Through the years a lot of faith learning has happened in WMA through EFM and many Bible Study groups. Right now 143 Episcopalians are reading the entire Bible together in 365 days and sharing the experience in a Facebook group. Recently some of our churches have done Renewal Works, a scripture based faith formation program. RENEWAL WORKS has been around for a while and has done some good research on Episcopalians. It has found that 50% of all Episcopalians volunteer at their church or in their community. That is wonderful. It shows we really get “love of neighbor.” But only 10 percent read the bible on any kind of regular way. Only 15 percent pray daily. Only 8 percent have any idea what God as Trinity means. Now no one completely understands that

Mystery but shouldn’t we have some inkling as how to express the faith that is within us?

The Way of Love means a commitment to being a lifelong learner about the immense depth of our souls and about who God is. Here’s a learning I had this year. Like all of you, my life is one of abundant blessings and some really tough trials. I can say that I had more of those trials this year than in any time of my ministry. I kept hoping they would all get resolved so I could have some inner peace that was eluding me. When everything in our diocese was fixed and the way it is supposed to be, then I could know God’s presence again. But through a lot of prayer, study, self- reflection and counseling I gradually learned something new at age 63. God is present in it all. God might even be most present when we are on the cross. I learned to say this prayer which is a Buddhist version of our Psalm 4:

“Even in the midst of great pain, Lord, I praise you for that which is. I will not refuse this

grief or close myself to this anguish. Let shallow men pray for ease: ‘Comfort us; shield us from sorrow.’ I pray for whatever you send me, and I ask to receive it as your gift. You have put joy in my heart greater than all the world’s riches. I lie down trusting the darkness, for even now I know you are here.”

I can’t say I really understood that until now. To be able to say in times of great stress: Even here. Even here God is present.

The Way of Love means prayer, worship, learning and...

REST. Thomas Merton said “there must be more to life than increasing its pace.” Here’s an example. This past summer my son Geoff and I walked part of the Camino de Santiago in Spain. What a blessing it was! A lot of fun. And here’s something we learned. The first few days we were walking along, not rushing, but moving at our usual pace. My son is 6’3”. We both have long legs. So our usual pace meant we were passing all the other pilgrims on the path. The tradition is when you pass someone on the trail to say “Buen Camino.” We were saying “Buen Camino” a lot. But then Geoff’s knee started to tighten up on him. Not enough to make us end the trip, but enough to make us slow up. Now we were walking side by side with other pilgrims. We met people from South Korea, New Zealand, Ireland, Spain, and the US. And we listened to their stories. Anyone who travels around the world to walk a couple of hundred miles with strangers has a story. Our Camino experience became even richer because we slowed down.

Americans are time poor. How can we slow down and rest? How can we make that part of The Way of Love? Because if we don’t, we will miss out on a lot of blessings God wants us to experience.

My favorite theologian, Walter Brueggemann, says Sabbath is essential to the religious experience of life. For the Hebrew people, enslaved to the Egyptians, the work week was seven days of making bricks. Observing the Sabbath was a radical, revolutionary statement that there is one day when we are not making bricks. There is more to being human than work. Brueggemann also writes about the Creation story as we know it from Genesis. In that story God, called Yahweh by the Hebrew people, rests on the 7th day. Brueggemann writes:

“That divine rest on the 7th day of creation made clear (a) that Yahweh is not a workaholic, (b) Yahweh is not anxious about the full-functioning of creation, (c) that the wellbeing of creation does not depend on endless work.”

And as Richard Rohr says: “Unless one seventh of life is ceasing from work, work will always become compulsive, addictive, driven, unconscious, and counterproductive for the self and those around us.”

Rest allows us to find our worth in who we are, not what we do.

BLESS. One definition of “bless” is to render something holy.

And although it is a “churchy” term, I think it speaks to great human longing to be acknowledged as worthy. When our kids were growing, each day when they left for school Betsy would bless

each one of them with the sign of the cross on their foreheads, with the words “Remember you belong to God. You are a beloved child of God.” When their friends would stay over at our house and they saw that – these children, many of whom did not belong to a church- would say “Mama Fish, bless me too.”

Blessing says something vital directly to the human soul because it acknowledges a deep truth. That is why we bless creation because it is innately holy. That is why we reclaim Mt. Tom when it has been desecrated by hate. That is why we pick up syringes in Fuller Park and reclaim that oasis of green space for Worcester’s families. It is innately holy to God who made it all. It must be holy to us.

It is why we had a liturgy this year for the “blessing of journalists.” As political leaders from Thomas Jefferson to John McCain have said “there is no democracy without journalists.” At a time when journalists are in physical danger around the globe and frequently mocked here in the USA, we wanted to bless them to acknowledge the holiness of their work. When word got out about that blessing, numerous bishops contacted me to say they would do that too.

The Way of Love invites us to bless: school teachers, policemen, business owners, laborers, farmworkers, nurses, office staff and on and on. When so often we live out of a scarcity model, blessing shouts abundance.

TURN. All preachers have a “go to” line. Something they say in almost every sermon. For Michael Curry it is “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.” For me it is “following Jesus on his

Mission of Mercy, Compassion and Hope.” I asked a few of our preachers in WMA and here is what they said about their “go to” lines. If you hear one that came from your preacher, give him or her a wink.

- “God is always more – more mercy, more love than we can ever deserve or imagine.”
- “Jesus meets us where we are and walks us to a new and deeper place. And if we don’t grab change by the hand, it will grab us by the throat.”
- “Christ welcomed all. We welcome you.”
- “Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So be quick to love and make haste to be kind. And rest assured God is infinitely more concerned with the hope of our future than the sins of our past.”

You know what St. Paul’s “go to” line was? If you were at the Revival in Worcester on Sunday you would know the answer. Anyone want to shout it out? “But Now.” He writes it 27 times in his letters. As in Ephesians: “For once you were in darkness, BUT NOW in the Lord you ARE Light.” And later in Ephesians: “Before you were far from God, BUT NOW you have been brought near by Christ.”

The Way of Love means we “turn” from one way of life to another. We see things differently. Jesus made a difference in lives 2000 years ago and he makes a difference in our lives now. You all know

Jesus. What difference has he made in your life? What is your “but now” statement of faith? Here are some that people have expressed to me through the years:

- I was anxiety ridden. But now I keep hearing Jesus with his “go to” line: Be Not Afraid. I am with you.
- I was addicted to (fill in the blank). But now I have been set free.
- I used to think of people in stereotypes. But now I recognize the dignity of every human being.
- I used to complain a lot. But now I am grateful. I used to be cynical. But now I live in hope.
- I used to feel God’s presence only in the good times. But now in times of darkness, I can say “even here God is present.”

The Way of Love is about turning. Where has your life turned? And what turn might be coming up?

And “turning” is not just for individuals. It can be for churches and communities and even corporations.

I have been interviewed numerous times by the press in the last few months for a resolution that I sponsored at General Convention in Austin last summer. It calls for ethical investing in gun manufacturers. As you know, gun violence is a public health crisis. 96 people a day die from gun violence in the United States. There are many reasons and the issue is complex. But complexity does not keep us from searching for solutions. Our young people certainly want solutions. They have shown up in great numbers at American Outdoor Brands and at other places to state their fears and request dialogue. That gets met with silence. The same silence we get from our federal government on this issue. So where can we make progress on this public health crisis? The General Convention of our Church has agreed that stockholder activism is one point of contact. And it has worked at Dick’s Sporting Good and at Sturm Ruger. We are not trying to drive gun companies out of business. We are inviting them to “turn” and become part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

GO. God said to Abraham: Go! Moses said to Pharaoh: Let my people go! The angel at the empty tomb of Jesus told the women: Go! Deacon Jane Griesbach’s “go to” line in her sermons is “Go out of the building and be the church.”

There are many, many examples in WMA of our churches going out to places of need and possibility. Reconciliation’s Sober House, the veterans ministry, Walking Together, several street ministries like Church Without Walls and Cathedral in the Night and Cathedral in the Light, and Cathedral of the Beloved, Lawrence House, the Chaplaincy at the Women’s Correctional Facility in Chicopee, our Creation Care ministry and thank you WMA there is not time to name them all. We have celebrated them at past conventions and will again. For now, I’ll offer a couple of recent examples.

The fearless followers of Jesus at St. Mark’s Leominster noticed people hanging out at the Monument in the middle of town. Some seemed to be hurting. In response they began “Prayers and Picnic in the Park.” They leave the church building, go a few blocks away, set up a tent and offer food and take prayer requests.

Through the years, I often wondered about having “chaplains to the Appalachian Trail.” The AT runs right through our diocese. And like the Camino in Spain, people come from around the world to walk from Georgia to Maine or parts of it. You know people who do that are searching for something. And all of us in churches are asking “where are the young people?” They are on the Appalachian Trail – many do it after graduating high school or college. This year the people of Christ/Trinity in Sheffield who know that grace is amazing, teamed up with the local UCC Church and started an outreach to the AT which is so near their church building. Doing it with the local United Church of Christ is a wonderful expression of the collaboration that we all encouraged at our Convention last year. They too set up a tent and offer shelter and food and the number one need on the Appalachian Trail – rechargers for iPhones! I was there one Saturday and just asked the simple question of the hikers “Why are you doing this?” and the stories flowed.

The congregation Atonement Westfield, who know that the Holy Spirit is wild and free, recognized the great possibilities of going a few blocks away to Westfield State University. They have set up a ministry there that started small but is really growing. I was there this week for a panel of church leaders from several different traditions talked about how crucial campus ministry is and vowed to work together at Westfield State and beyond. We are so blessed to add Westfield State to the long list of vital campus ministries in WMA. And with 32 college campuses there plenty of opportunities. But we can’t just put out a sign that says “The Episcopal Church welcomes you.” We need to go where they are.

You all know that wise advice about what determines the value of real estate: “location, location, location.” It applies to church ministry as well. Before you GO, remember Jesus’ “go to” line. He said “look”, “see”, “stay awake”, even more than he said “love.” What is in your neighborhood? Where is the need?

Where are the possibilities? See and go. Go! You are so good at this, WMA! Know that we have a very dedicated team who are working hard at ways to gather the financial resources to help these ministries continue long into the future. And GO means addressing the issues of our day. Climate change, racism, immigration, the public health crisis of gun violence among others.

Oscar Romero was recently canonized a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. He was the Archbishop of San Salvador. On March 24, 1980 he was assassinated as he was celebrating Mass. The assassination happened right after he concluded a homily about John’s Gospel chapter 12 verses 23-26. Where Jesus says “those who love their own life lose it.” Here’s what Romero said in that last homily:

“You have just heard Christ’s Gospel that one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life which history demands of us.”

My WMA brothers and sisters, history is making demands on us. Our children’s future is making demands on us. For their sake let us get involved in the “risks of life” in our time. Which is God’s time. Our faith is not an abstraction. It is not “once upon a time in a land far away.” We pray “thy will be done on EARTH as it is in heaven.”

If we truly and deeply engage this way of love, maybe sometime soon someone will write a letter to his or her friends like this: “The world can be a mean and cruel place. But here in Western and Central Massachusetts there are communities of people from Fitchburg to Sheffield, from Williamstown to Milford who care about each other. They give whatever it takes to help one another in need. They follow the Way of Love and are part of the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it. And they seem very happy living this way. I think I will join them and try this way for a while.”

Amen.