

BOOK REVIEW

LOVE IS THE WAY ***Holding Onto Hope in Troubling Times*** **by Bishop Michael Curry**

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Bishop Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, shares his personal story in this book, which speaks to the process of living and growing into the new reality of the continuing pandemic. The bishop addresses the ongoing struggles of racism, violence, poverty, and injustice, taking the encounters from his life and sharing how these led to lessons and relationships infused with love. Stories from his ministry show again and again how people overcame divisions and created loving relationships.

Bishop Curry begins by defining agape as love that is focused outward, love that acts for the well-being of someone else. The opposite of this kind of love is not hate; it is selfishness. Agape love is a verb because it is centered on action, seeking to do good for others. He quotes from 1 Corinthians 13 and explains to whom Paul was writing – people who were fighting with one another. He also uses Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* to outline the need for mutuality and community.

Drawing on his childhood in Buffalo, Bishop Curry describes the experience of community that profoundly shaped him. Because his mother had a long-term illness, friends from church took him to school every day. Other friends and neighbors checked his homework, stayed with his family when his father was away, and encouraged his application to college as he grew older. He writes, "We were always resting in the loving hands of our church community. Which is to say, in God's hands." (p. 36) His mother died when he was fourteen and he navigated the grief through the love of his community.

This childhood community, and other communities Bishop Curry served as a pastor, practiced agape love. At St. James Episcopal Church in Baltimore, he conducted the funeral for a young man shot on the sidewalk in that neighborhood. Young men acting as the pallbearers said, as the casket was lowered, "we will see you soon" to their dead friend. Bishop Curry realized they only knew the rituals of the streets, so his church started a community outreach program, bringing spiritual rituals to a neighborhood affected by violence.

As part of his book, Bishop Curry writes of the dreamers who acted in agape love to create new realities. He was influenced by a speech he heard from Archbishop Desmond Tutu who shared his dream for everyone to be free in South Africa. To me, this story has special meaning because of Tutu's recent death. Dreaming, according to Bishop Curry, created the civil rights movement and a South Africa free from apartheid. Dreams help us as people of faith create new realities with God's help. He explains,

“To be a person of faith is to be the one who says, Why not? It is to refuse to accept and acquiesce to the way things often are. It is to pray and work for the way things could be.” (p. 79) He shares Dr. King’s Ten Commandments of Nonviolence as a framework.

As Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Curry has been in many situations that challenged him to look deeper and work towards reconciliation. For example, during a service at Christ Church Cathedral in New Orleans, he sat in a chair made by slaves. His Eucharistic prayer asked for unity and redemption, pointing a way to the future and also acknowledging the past. In another instance, he visited Botswana as part of a companion relationship there with the Anglican Church. The Anglican churches along with many others had started daycare centers to care for the children in poverty-stricken areas. These centers were one example of many in the book of people of faith working towards a new reality, serving the least of these with agape love.

The most powerful part of the book and relevant to the times we are living through is Bishop Curry asking the question, “Who is your neighbor?” This chapter is titled “Leave No One Behind.” Noticing the neighbor is noticing the presence of God in the world. Inspired by the book *I and Thou* by Martin Buber, Bishop Curry describes the process of recognizing everyone as having dignity and worth. An after-school reading program grew into a full academy of tutoring and programs at one church he served. These programs did not happen quickly and there was resistance from the members. However, the church thoughtfully and prayerfully noticed the needs in their community and responded with love. Bishop Curry advises, “Stop, look, listen, learn. The key is to pause deliberately to give yourself time to notice your neighbor. The answer to the question who is my neighbor is the person who needs our love.” (p. 144)

Bishop Curry is a master storyteller and *Love is the Way* is about relationships and storytelling. Relationships get us past the view of someone as the other. Storytelling can heal divisions and create understanding. The way Bishop Curry describes his relationships and tells stories is powerful and life-giving. Additionally, the appendix of *Love is the Way* has tips and spiritual practices to get started on actions that create loving individuals and communities. The categories for action include body, mind, spirit, relationships, giving back, and community. However, he reminds us that we are not doing this alone. We walk with God and with each other to create and live into new realities.

In summary, this book offers inspiration as we serve our neighbors and minister to the vulnerable among us during the continuing pandemic. His descriptions of ministries that were created from relationships can be used for community organizing, outreach and service, faith in daily life, and simply living out the gospel in a particular time and place. Several discussion guides are available online for small groups.

