

THE WAY OF LOVE

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO FOLLOWING JESUS

Scott Gunn

With

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Psalm quotations are from *The Book of Common Prayer*.

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ISBN: 978-0-88028-486-8

Printed in the USA



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FOREWORD

It's probably not an accident that most of Jesus' teachings about love are uttered the closer he gets to sacrificing his life for the sake of others.

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

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Jesus spoke all these words during the last supper, according to the Gospel of John. Judas would soon betray him. Peter would soon pretend to not know him, and others would soon abandon Jesus. Secular and religious forces would array against him as he faced a future of false charges, torture, and execution. Yet Jesus spoke of love.

Such love is not a mere sentiment but a real commitment to a way of life that is sacrificial and redemptive, a way that seeks the good of God and the well-being of others. This Way of Love is a game changer.

During Holy Week in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has a conversation with a lawyer as he nears the decision to give his life. This interaction may well be one of the most stunning—and one of the most stunningly underestimated—passages in the whole Bible. The lawyer, for whatever reason, asks Jesus to name the most important law in the entire legal edifice of Moses. Jesus reaches back to Leviticus and Deuteronomy to identify two laws of Moses that answer the question.

He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”
—Matthew 22:37-39

Then the stunner. Jesus add these words: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the

prophets.” The English Standard Version translates it this way: “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” The Message paraphrase of the Bible renders it this way: “These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.”

In other words, this is it. Love God. Love your neighbor. And while you’re at it, love yourself. Everything that Moses taught, everything the prophets thundered forth about justice and righteousness and truth, everything written in the scriptures, everything in the tradition of religion, everything that claims to be of or about God must reflect love. Love is God’s way of life because, as 1 John says, “God is love.” God is the source and the origin of love. “Where true love is found, God himself is there,” says the medieval hymn. To put it another way, if it’s not about love, it’s not about God. And if it truly is about love, it is about God. And that’s a game changer when we dare to believe and live this truth.

My friend Charles Marsh, a professor at the University of Virginia, writes about this extraordinary love in his book *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes*

Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today. He proclaims that Jesus “founded the most revolutionary movement in human history; a movement built on the unconditional love of God for the world and the mandate to live that love.”

My friend is right! Jesus founded a movement that is revolutionary when it is lived. Jesus—his teachings, his example, his very life—became the center of the lives of his followers. And his way of love became their way of life. Their lives were profoundly changed, and they helped God change the world for the good in their time. What was true for them in the first century is true for us in the twenty-first!

A few years ago, a group of Episcopalians gathered in Atlanta to help me think about how to encourage all of us as the church to be the modern iteration of the Jesus Movement.

We soon realized that we didn’t have to invent something new. The deep roots of Judaism and Christianity offer rich and time-tested spiritual practices and disciplines, ways of prayer, meditation,

study, hospitality, and witness. For centuries, these practices have helped to draw those who engaged them into a loving, liberating, and life-giving relationship with God and into loving, liberating, and life-giving relationships with others and with God's world. The folks we speak of as saints consistently engaged these spiritual practices, which nourished in them a Jesus-centered life of love and witness.

We wondered: What would happen if we asked every Episcopalian to adopt these practices for a Jesus-centered life? How would God, through us, change lives and the world?

The group developed the concept of the Way of Love. But to be certain, it is not a program, done once and put away on a shelf. The Way of Love is a set of ancient spiritual practices to help every Episcopalian develop a Jesus-centered rule of life.

The words—Turn! Learn! Pray! Worship! Bless! Go! Rest!—emerged as verbs that captured the spirit of this way. Go and make disciples! Go and proclaim good news! Go and be my witnesses in Jerusalem,

Judaea, in Samaria, in first-century Galilee and in the twenty-first century world! Go! And then Rest. As the old hymn says:

O Sabbath rest of Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee,
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love.

This book offers a guide to embarking on the Way of Love. It is full of practical advice for how to embrace the seven Way of Love spiritual practices with an approach that is authentic and personal. My prayer is that this book will help you and me and all of us to throw our very lives into the hands of Jesus, such that his way of love becomes our way of life, and his life becomes ours.

God love you. God bless you. And may God hold us all in those almighty hands of love.

Michael B. Curry
XXVII Presiding Bishop
The Episcopal Church

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, Bishop Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, gathered a small group to meet with him for two days in Atlanta. He had spent the last couple of years challenging his church to claim the mantle of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. It was time to think about how to build on that challenging and inviting message.

There were about a dozen of us in total, and we shared an invigorating conversation steeped in prayer. It didn't take long for a consensus to build among the group that the next step should be a focus on spiritual practices. At that Atlanta meeting, our small group quickly reached consensus that regular worship, scripture study, daily prayer, service of others, and evangelism would be key practices. Bishop Curry's staff did a brilliant job of taking our skeleton and

adding both depth and accessibility to a bold initiative called the Way of Love.

As Bishop Curry's invitation to spiritual practices, the Way of Love uses seven key verbs: Turn. Learn. Pray. Worship. Bless. Go. Rest. This book is an exploration of what these verbs mean in the context of our life of faith. More importantly, I hope it is a practical and encouraging guide to begin or deepen your own spiritual practices as a follower of Jesus.

I am excited about the Way of Love and its potential to transform the world one life at a time. It is completely approachable and yet so deep we could spend a lifetime exploring its expanse. The Way of Love does not require fancy programs or big budgets. We who follow Jesus need only to make the commitment to live our lives in ways that draw us ever deeper into becoming more Christlike. To follow Jesus is to make extraordinary commitments. We are to love God with our whole being. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are to love others as Jesus has loved us, even taking up our own cross.

But this life of faith is far from burdensome. To follow Jesus is to know the hope, mercy, and grace he offered the world and that he offers each one of us. The cross is a sign of Christ's love for us, and the empty tomb of Easter morning is a sign of God's power over evil and death.

Following Jesus is easier said than done, and that's why we need to find a way to live this cross-shaped life. The Way of Love invites us to deep disciplines that remind us daily of God's great love for us and calls us to share that love with a world in need of hope. The Way of Love practices are as simple as daily prayer with God and spending some time with God's word in the Bible.

How to use this book

You can certainly pick up this book and move through it on your own. Each chapter offers clear explanations of the seven steps of the Way of Love as well as practical ways you might begin or further enrich your journey. At the end of each chapter, you'll find reflection questions to ponder before continuing on to the next practice. There is also space to make notes.

Please write in this book (unless you got it from the library!). In the final chapter, you'll have a chance to review what you've written and read in previous chapters and craft a rule of life to help you pursue the Way of Love.

This book also works well for group study or a formation class. The reflection questions serve as catalysts for small-group conversation. The group or class leader can teach each step over seven sessions or move more quickly in the context of a parish retreat or workshop day. Perhaps leaders will share their own stories to supplement or even replace the stories shared here. Individuals can make notes in the book and create a personalized rule of life, or the group might consider a collective rule of life for their time together.

The biblical readings referenced throughout the book are included in the appendix to make it easier to read the full narrative. If you'd like to look up the verses in your own Bible, you can do that as well. We used the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer* for psalm and liturgy quotations.

We also gathered some suggested resources for further exploration and listed them in the back of this book. You can also find many other Way of Love resources at the Forward Movement website (forwardmovement.org) or the Episcopal Church website (episcopalchurch.org/wayoflove).

Gratitude

The gathering in Atlanta was a spiritual high point for me. I am grateful to Michael Curry for the invitation to be part of the group. He was joined by key members of his staff, including Stephanie Spellers, Michael Hunn, and Chuck Robertson. Bill Lupfer hosted the conversation. Our discernment group was Mariann Budde, Megan Castellan, Courtney Cowart, Frank Logue, Tricia Lyons, Jesús Reyes, Rob Wright, Dwight Zscheile, and me. I am thankful for the seven inspiring people who answered the call to offer personal reflections for this volume. The manuscript was much improved because of helpful feedback I received on an early draft from Steve Pankey, Melody Shobe, and Adam Trambley. Rachel Jones and Richelle Thompson made my prose better with

their editorial skill, and Lexi Caoili created a lovely design. Everything that Forward Movement offers is the fruit of our whole staff, and I could list every staff person as having made a contribution to this volume. I am blessed to serve with such skilled and passionate workers. Of course, above all, I am grateful for the grace upon grace bestowed upon us and the world in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Scott Gunn

Easter Day 2020

Cincinnati, Ohio

CHAPTER 1

TURN

Turning—the first and most basic spiritual practice—is what makes the Christian life possible. If I believe everything about my life and the world is just fine, I can keep on going in the direction I’m headed. But once I realize everything is not all right with me or the world, I also realize I need to change direction—toward God and away from my self-centered way.

Turn is a gentler way to talk about a harder churchy concept: repentance. One of the key concepts in Jesus’ message, repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia*. It means “change of mind.” This isn’t in a flip way, like when I decide to have pancakes instead of waffles. *Metanoia* means a deeper transformation, a completely new way of thinking.

This gets to the heart of the gospel. Matthew's Gospel says that the very first public teaching of Jesus is about turning. "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Matthew 4:17).

Turning is not a one-and-done endeavor. While some Christians say we simply accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and then we're finished with the turning business, Anglican Christianity understands turning as something we do in big and in small ways every day. Each time we turn, we admit we were going the wrong way and must head in a new direction.

Though turning must be a part of our journey day-in, day-out, there is one big turn that we make. The Christian life begins in the baptismal font. There, we are reborn spiritually, cleansed from our sins, and grafted into Christ's body, the church. *The Book of Common Prayer* makes it clear that those to be baptized are turning. "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?" (p. 302).

At baptism, we reject Satan and his wickedness, the evil powers of this world, and the sinful desires that

draw us from the love of God. We turn toward Jesus Christ, accepting him as our savior and trusting in his grace and love. We promise to follow Jesus and obey him as our Lord. When we are faithful in our promise to follow Jesus, we become willing and ready to keep turning back to him each time we go off course.

Turning in big and small ways

How do we turn? How can we manage to get this right? Good news, friends! We aren't alone, and we don't have to get it right every time. In fact, we'll mess up far more often than we manage to do the right thing.

When I realized God was calling me to leave behind a rewarding career in technology to serve as a priest, I had to turn. That was a big turn. When I do something dumb and hurt a friend's feelings, when I decide to apologize and seek reconciliation, that's a medium change. When driving in Boston not long ago, it occurred to me that letting someone cut in front of me was a kind of generosity that might be good for my soul. That was an example of just turning my head and

heart ever so slightly and seeing things in a new way, a small turn.

One of my favorite baptismal promises is helpful in thinking about turning. The celebrant asks, “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, *whenever* you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” And we reply, “I will, with God’s help.” I love this promise because it assures me that I can only do these things with God’s help. And it assumes that I will fall into sin: it’s not *if* I fall into sin but *whenever* I fall into sin.

We don’t have to get life’s decisions right all the time. We just have to try. Grace comes alongside us when we try—and helps us recognize that people around us are trying too. And in all our efforts to try to turn, God is our abiding companion and guide.

The burning bush

The story of Moses is amazing, epic even. (Exodus 3 has the whole story, and we’ve included it in the appendix for you to enjoy. Or you can look it up in your own Bible. But you should read it. It’s great.) Early in Moses’ story is a moment that is both

ordinary and mind-bogglingly supernatural. One day Moses is minding his own business, tending his sheep. As he walks along, he sees a burning bush. Nothing in the text suggests Moses knows *why* the bush is burning.

Imagine the scene. Moses is busily taking care of his sheep, and he probably has a long to-do list running through his head—grazing, watering, safety, shady spot for a nap. The normal thing to do would be to make note of the bush and keep walking to the next grassy spot or water well. But that's not what Moses does. You can almost hear him, "Huh, that's weird. I guess I'll go check it out." What Moses actually says, according to Exodus, is, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up."

Moses turns.

We shouldn't take this for granted. Moses doesn't know he is about to speak with the living and true God. Moses has concrete, definite things to do—and a plan for doing them. Despite all that, he turns.

When Moses walks over to the burning bush, God speaks to him. God assures Moses that the suffering of the Hebrews has been seen and that God will work

to liberate them. God tells Moses that he will soon challenge Pharaoh and lead the people to freedom in the promised land. All this because Moses turned.

Imagine if Moses had stuck to his plan. The sheep would have gotten where they needed to go a bit sooner. But God's plan of salvation wouldn't have worked out the same way. We don't know how the story would be different—and we don't have to speculate because Moses made the choice to turn. Our ancestors' freedom rested on Moses' simple decision to turn aside from his own plans, to be drawn toward God.

The turning couldn't have been simpler—literally a few steps down a well-worn path. But the consequences couldn't have been more significant.

My own turning

Not long after we moved to Cincinnati, my spouse and I were out doing errands and walking around downtown. I'm the goal-tracker in our relationship, so I was probably reminding Sherilyn that we needed to hurry up.

Along the way, we passed a man holding a sign asking for food. I made eye contact and spoke to him, thinking that was a kind thing to do. But Sherilyn stopped, turned aside from our journey and our orderly list of tasks, and asked the man if we could buy him lunch.

We were standing near a Mexican fast food place, and as we walked toward the restaurant, I was grateful we were feeding a hungry person. I was also hoping it wouldn't take too long, but God had other plans—the line was out the door. While we waited in line, we had little choice but to talk with our guest. We shared names and talked about downtown Cincinnati. He told us a bit about his story, and we told him a bit about ours. When it was time to order, we offered to buy him whatever he wanted. He only wanted a burrito.

He thanked us more profusely than we deserved... certainly more than I deserved. It wasn't hard to do the right thing. It took ten minutes and cost a few dollars. Later that day, I thought about our encounter. I realized—and I know this is going to sound hokey, but stick with me—we bought Jesus a burrito. In Matthew 25, Jesus says that when we feed the hungry,

clothe the naked, visit prisoners, welcome strangers, and the like, we are doing these things for Christ himself. We wouldn't have met this man if Sherilyn hadn't turned aside. If it had been up to me, we would have missed out on feeding a hungry person. I am sure we met Jesus on the sidewalk because of a simple turn.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: TURN

When I was baptized in my early twenties as a college senior, sin didn't mean much to me. For one thing, an unseemly emphasis on sin was why I had deliberately chosen not to join several churches. For another, the end of apartheid in South Africa and the collapse of European communism made me believe humanity might have arrived at a new era of goodness. Why did I need a robust theology of sin when so much of what I considered systematic sin was becoming history too?

The years between that young man and the less-young man I am now have lent some maturity and given me a greater willingness to examine my actions and motivations. These two hallmarks of

adulthood have led me to understand how naive I was.

When making choices about money or my career, I've had—and often chosen—the great luxury to do whatever seemed the best thing for me, never minding whether it was actually the right thing to do. This has resulted in sometimes being a neglectful friend and an inattentive spouse, despite my best intentions. When I think about my material comfort when so many are in need, I soothe myself with the fiction that there's really nothing I can do to make things different...or better.

This state of the soul—mine, and probably yours and most of the other people we know—is as old as Paul's plaintive musing, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:19, 24).

Jesus promises us that when we stop deceiving ourselves about our ability to overcome sin and turn to follow him, we will find forgiveness and grace.

I made that turn at my baptism, not realizing I would need to make it over and over again for a lifetime. By gathering regularly with a group to pray, worship, study and do the kinds of loving service that Jesus taught, I am more aware of the turns and more willing and able to make them. These disciplines don't shield us from failure, but they do bind our wandering hearts to Christ so that when we stray, it is easier to turn back to him—our companion in the Way of Love.

—Brendan O'Sullivan-Hale

Brendan O'Sullivan-Hale is canon to the ordinary for administration and evangelism in the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis, where he manages finances and operations and supports lay and clergy leaders in developing creative strategies to observe how God is acting in the communities they serve and responding faithfully with the good news of Jesus Christ. He is a member of the Episcopal Church of All Saints, Indianapolis.

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The real point of these stories about turning is that if we are so stubborn about sticking to our plans, we will miss encounters with Jesus Christ. Since that day outside of the Mexican fast food restaurant, I understand that what seems like a digression might be the most important thing I am called to do. Taking that turn, being willing to go off course or getting off-topic is one of the ways we find out what God is calling us to do, where to go, and how to be.

Think of examples of when you have turned. Recalling times when you have done the right thing or turned back toward God or even made a simple course correction feels good. We don't spend enough time in our culture talking about our spiritual successes. It feels like bragging, even though it isn't—it is sharing good news. We need to spend time telling each other our turning stories. Sharing these stories will help us see that turning is not nearly as complicated as we make it.

Which way to turn?

How do we know which way to go? How can we be sure we're turning toward Jesus and not away from

him? I think most of the time, these choices and turns are pretty clear. And when they are not, we have a variety of tools to help us see more clearly the will of God. We can study the scriptures so that we might know the mind of Christ in God's word. We can spend time in a church community so that we have the aid of other pilgrims along the way. We can pray, opening our hearts and eyes in the trust that God will show us the way.

We won't get it right all the time. We will fail to turn. We will fall in our turning. We will turn the wrong direction. But the very, very Good News of God in Jesus Christ is that we aren't turning so that we can finally deserve God's love. God loves us more than we can ask or imagine. On the cross, Jesus Christ accomplished our salvation. On Easter morning, God the Father raised Jesus Christ from the dead, showing that God's love is stronger than death or any evil in the world. And Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will abide with us, leading us into all truth.

We do not turn to earn God's love—we turn in order to give thanks and enjoy God's vast love for us. Jesus came to save sinners and his greatest desire is that we

be free from the tyranny of sin and death. In faith, we turn to him again and again, so that we might know and enjoy the eternal life he has promised.

How do we turn?

Your own journey will be different from anyone else's, so there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Nevertheless, there are some common approaches to turning that can help us in our journey.

- If you are not already baptized, speak with your priest and ask about preparing for baptism. This might be the most important turn for someone who wants to follow Jesus.
- Set aside (more) intentional time for daily prayer and study of scripture in your life.
- Perhaps you have an estranged friend with whom you might practice reconciliation. Maybe you can be extravagantly generous with someone in great need who cannot pay you back for what you offer. Pick something that is an example of clearly turning toward Jesus and give it a try.

- Nurture spiritual friendships. It's important to have spiritual friendships to share your highs and lows and to be part of a church community.
- Commit to regular worship. Offering our thanks and praise—and being fed by the sacraments—keeps us heading in the right direction and nourishes us for the journey.

Turning usually feels pretty good. Don't be ashamed of that. This doesn't mean you are being prideful. The Christian life is meant to be deeply joyful. Share your joy with a friend or someone in your church. Encourage other people on their journey.

FOR REFLECTION

1. When is a time you turned in a way that helped you grow in your faith?

SAMPLE

2. What keeps you from turning more readily?

3. What might you do to turn in new ways,
more often?

WRITE IT DOWN

Which of the approaches for turning appeal to you? Write down some ideas for how you might live into this approach. Be specific and realistic for where you are now. For instance, if you decide to devote more time to prayer and Bible study, name the time, place, and frequency that you can really do this.

PRAY

Almighty God, help me reject those things that keep me from your ways, and give me strength and courage to turn to follow your life-giving son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.