

MARY BEA SULLIVAN

Living
THE
Way of Love

A 40-DAY DEVOTIONAL

Foreword by Courtney V. Cowart & Stephanie Spellers



*To Malcolm, Brendan, Kiki, and Marcy—
wherever you go, I send a piece of my heart with you.
You are my primary teachers in the way of love.*

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Introduction

What do you most desire in your life today? A renewed prayer life? A deeper connection to Jesus? Balance? Clarity? Peace? I invite you to join me in this forty-day pilgrimage of practices for living the way of love. These practices can help us focus our energy on living the way Jesus lived—the way of powerful, liberating, redemptive, world-changing, unconditional love. A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey toward a desired destination. A pilgrimage requires taking time separate from everyday demands. My prayer is that your holy “yes” toward devoting some time each day to living a Jesus-centered life will take you closer to your desired destination.

The seed for this book came from watching an inspiring video of the Episcopal Church’s 27th presiding bishop, Michael Curry, inviting us to claim, or reclaim, the Jesus-inspired practices “that can train up the spirit to follow in the way of Jesus and to look something like Jesus.”³ These biblically inspired practices are:

3. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, “The Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life,” The Episcopal Church, accessed December 3, 2018, www.episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love.

Introduction

Turn
Learn
Pray
Worship
Bless
Go
Rest

What follows are thirty-six brief daily reflections along with journaling prompts and spiritual exercises intended to support living a Jesus-centered life. Each of these reflections corresponds to one of the seven practices mentioned above. Days thirty-seven through forty offer reflections designed to help you identify the practices that are most important to you. Finally, the epilogue on page 111 provides guidance for creating your own “rule of life”—a framework of practices that are most effective in helping you find the Way of Love and walk its path. If you choose to use this book with companions in a small group, a facilitator guide can be downloaded at www.churchpublishing.org/livingthewayoflove.

A rule of life is a premise grounded in the Benedictine tradition. One author describes it this way, “The root meaning of the Latin and Greek words translated as ‘rule’ is *trellis*. Saint Benedict was not promulgating rules for living; he was establishing a framework on which a life can grow. While a branch of a plant climbing a trellis cannot go in any direction it wants, you cannot know in advance just which way it will go. The plant is finding

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its own path, within a structure. The space in which it moves is open, though not without boundaries.”⁴

Esther de Waal writes, “St. Benedict never loses sight of the primacy of love; the Rule might almost be called a handbook on the practice of loving. That living out of love in its most practical terms, which we struggle with every day, hinges on our love of Christ, the keystone of it all.”⁵

In preparation for beginning this pilgrimage, I encourage you to find a quiet spot to return to each day. Perhaps you will claim it as sacred and place a candle there. Carve out fifteen minutes to an hour each day to attune your heart to the heartbeat of God. You may wish to purchase a special journal for recording your thoughts. There are also spaces within these pages to jot down your immediate reflections following a few prompts.

In concluding his call to following in the way of love, Bishop Curry said, “The old hymn says it best, ‘Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou dost do.’”⁶ Trust that taking this time to replenish your soul will strengthen your connection to God and positively impact the world in ways you may never know. Trust that God will respond

4. Patrick Henry, ed., *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), 1.

5. Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 145.

6. Curry, “The Way of Love.”

Introduction

to your “holy yes” by growing you in the virtues of peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control; that you will grow in love of God and of neighbor.

God’s peace,
Mary Bea Sullivan
November 2018

Author’s note: Many stories are shared on these pages. I am grateful to those who entrusted their stories to me and to you and agreed for them to be included. When a child is mentioned, names have been changed. It is in the sharing of our stories that we grow in understanding of one another. We are all a part of the great story—God’s and ours.



Standing in the Hog Trough

I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.”
(Luke 15:18)

My friend and I were savoring fresh salads under the patio umbrellas at one of our favorite eateries. It was a rare, cool summer day in Birmingham. We were lamenting mistakes we had made and the challenge of coming back from the big ones. Leaning forward, she declared, “You know, it’s only when you realize you are standing in the hog trough that you can run back home to ask forgiveness.” Of course, she was alluding to the parable of the prodigal son and the epiphany he experiences after insulting his father, squandering his inheritance, and sinking to the lowliest of jobs—feeding the pigs. Ashamed, the son returns home to ask forgiveness (Luke 15:11–32).

What does standing in the hog trough mean to you? Is it looking at your bank balance and realizing your spending signifies an unhealthy need for more stuff? Is it when you find yourself staring across the table at a stranger, even though you had vowed to honor and cherish that

person forever? Perhaps it is waking up with another hangover or with that gnawing feeling you get when you have said something unkind, yet again.

We've all had them, those seminal moments when we can no longer hide from the ways we have hurt God, ourselves, or others. Like the trough, those moments stink; they are uncomfortable, but they are invitations to live anew. Yes, the hog trough is dark and dirty, but it pales in comparison to the exuberant love of the father who sprints toward his smelly son with outstretched arms, pulling him close and covering him in kisses. Jesus tells us the father was ready to forgive before the request was even made.

Such is the love and grace and forgiveness of God toward us. If all we had were the messes, we would be without hope. Thankfully, at the core of Jesus's message is reassurance that God desires a relationship with us—faults and all. Even in the worst mess of our own making, God is with us:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. (Isa. 43:2)

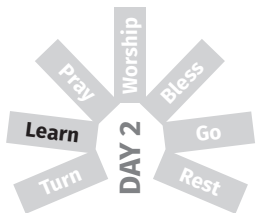
We need not remain paralyzed in the slop because we are loved and forgiven. I invite you to turn away from the trough and turn toward the grace of God's love and forgiveness.

Standing in the Hog Trough

Reflect

Describe a time you realized you were standing in the “hog trough.” What helped you turn back toward God’s love?

Perhaps you feel you are standing in it now. For what would you like to be forgiven? In what way do you desire to begin anew?



Listening to Scripture

“Listen carefully, my child, to the teaching of the master and bend close the ear of your heart.” —Catherine Wybourne, OSB, Prologue of the Rule of Saint Benedict⁷

We were gathered in a circle for a woman’s retreat, our attention drawn to the blue vase filled with wildflowers perched on the “altar” in the center. Gold-tinged votives flickering the light of the Christ adorned the “altar,” which was draped in crocheted blankets created by the hands of women who have long since left this earth.

I began the instructions for the sacred practice of slowly digesting scripture called *lectio divina*—an ancient practice of praying the scriptures. During *lectio divina*, the practitioner listens to the text of the Bible with the “ear of the heart,” as if he or she is in conversation with God, and God is suggesting the topics for

7. The opening sentence of the Prologue of the Rule of Saint Benedict. Catherine Wybourne, OSB translation. (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 221.

discussion.⁸ *Lectio divina* may be practiced alone or in a small group.

After we completed the prayerful reading of scripture, one of the women responded, “The reading came alive for me. I usually read so fast, but going slowly and taking time for silence, it felt like it seeped into my heart in a deep way.” Another person noticed, “I love that we read so much scripture on Sunday. Taking this small amount and lingering with it helped me to absorb it differently.”

Reflect

Yesterday, we read about the opportunity to return to God when we find ourselves “standing in the hog trough.” Today, you are invited to experience the “divine reading” (*lectio divina*) of a portion of that passage from Luke.

Slowly read aloud the following passage, taking time in silence after each reading:

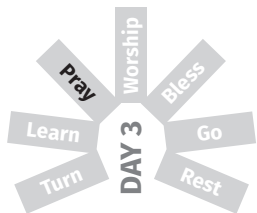
- The first time, **listen with the ear of the heart** for a word or a phrase.
- The second time, **reflect** on how the word touches you in your life today.

8. Lectio Divina instructions from Contemplative Outreach Brochure, www.contemplativeoutreach.org/sites/default/files/documents/lectio_divina.pdf.

- The third time, **respond** spontaneously to any prayer or expression of the experience.
- The fourth time, **rest** in the word allowing space for God to speak to you in the silence.

But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:17–24)

Perhaps you want to journal about what came to you in this time of sacred reading.



Giving Thanks

“For all things come of you, and of your own have we given you.” (1 Chron. 29:14)

Huddled in the choir room—a pack of exuberant young children and me—our mission was to create Prayers of the People for an upcoming children’s service. “Okay,” I began, “one of the ways we pray is to give thanks to God for the many gifts God gives us.” Sweet earnest eyes gazed back at me like sunflowers reaching toward the sun. Looks like those compel me to try and be a little better human being.

“I’m going to keep track of what you have to say and make a list. What are you thankful for?” Unprepared for the onslaught of appreciation which ensued, I scribbled as fast as I could. “My mom.” “Scout, my dog.” “Ice cream.” “Chocolate ice cream.” “Moose Tracks ice cream.” “Alright, I’ve got ice cream down—we can assume all flavors are included. What else are you grateful for?”

Shouting over one another, their prayers of thanks rising through the rafters. “The sun.” “My teachers.” “I’m thankful that I hit the ball yesterday.” “I’m thankful for the way the rain feels on my face.” Wow! That one surprised

me. The longer we steeped ourselves in gratitude, the more profound our perspective on that for which we were grateful became.

Gratitude does not mean that everything in our life is perfect; it is choosing to be content with our blessings instead of obsessing about what is missing. Gratitude unlocks the possibility for happiness and connects us with the Creator. Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you,’ it will be enough.”⁹

Recently, I was with a woman who is in her nineties. She rarely leaves her home, others tend to her most basic needs. A fashion icon in her day, she has given away her jewels and cares not for new clothes. She has known loss—the loss of loved ones and the obvious loss of lifestyle and physical abilities. When I asked her how she was doing, she beamed, “Oh, I am so grateful.” When I asked her to say more, she said, “I was explaining to a friend just the other day that even though I have had terribly sad things happen in my life, God always brought me to joy on the other side. It was horrible when my son died, and yet, I’m so glad I had him for as long as I did.”

“To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything. . . . Every breath we draw is a gift. . . . Every moment of existence is a grace.” —Thomas Merton , *Thoughts in Solitude*, 33 (1956)

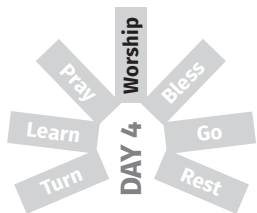
9. Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) was a German theologian and Christian mystic.

Giving Thanks

Reflect

“What are you thankful for?”

I invite you to keep a gratitude journal for one week. List at least ten things for which you are thankful each day. Avoid duplicating previous entries.



Kneeling at the Rail

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. (Book of Common Prayer, 281)

It was Good Friday and we were walking the Stations of the Cross in a field on the church's property. Solemnly, silently, we walked between each of the stations. The ground beneath our feet was uneven, requiring attention to assure not to turn an ankle or land in the dirt. At the conclusion of the final station, we continued into the church. Clergy knelt at the altar rail and the cross was draped across the rail, near me.

After the solemn collects were read, hushed silence cloaked the room. One at a time, people came forward to kiss or touch the cross, many with tear-stained faces. Finally, Gladys, one of the matriarchs of the congregation, came forward. Soft of body and fierce in faith, hers is an abiding in God steeped in joy and love and fresh grief. In the past nine months, she had buried two daughters and a husband. Where some of us would run from God in anger, Gladys runs toward God in trust.

Kneeling at the Rail

As if transported to the evangelical church of her native Jamaica, Gladys raised her palms to the sky and began to pray to God aloud. Gratitude and love and trust poured out of that God-soaked soul. Gladys prayed for her biological family, for her church family, and then she prayed for me—her priest. She named my husband, my children, she asked God to give me all those qualities one would desire in a priest—courage, faith, wisdom, and love. Kneeling next to Gladys, who was kneeling next to the cross, I was aware that in that moment, she was our priest.

The liturgical rhythm of the seasons resonate because they illuminate the entire scope of human experience. Regular participation in worship provides a Christ-centered framework for living in all stages and seasons of our lives.

Reflect

What is most meaningful to you in worship?

What do you find challenging?

When was a time you were surprised by God in worship?



Stories of Hope

“And you will have confidence, because there is hope; you will be protected and take your rest in safety.” (Job 11:18)

The text read, “Want to go to coffee?” Normally, this would be just another nice invitation for time together with a friend. However, this friend had rarely ventured out for social engagements during the past year. Her husband had been diagnosed with cancer. They had entered into a self-imposed quarantine to avoid germs hoping that he wouldn’t get sick and could stay on track with his treatments.

“Want to get coffee?” meant something more; it meant, “We’re coming to the other side of this thing.” It meant new life.

After a lengthy exchange about family and treatments and anything that gushed forth in our desire to reconnect, I asked my friend, “What did you learn that only this hard experience could have taught you?” Usually one to reflect before responding, my friend immediately said, “We love each other so much. We are closer than we have ever been before. I learned to take care of things he usually takes care of and he learned to let go and watch

me do them in ways that were different than his.” Pensive for a moment, she continued, “The hardest part is seeing him in pain. I can’t fix that. I can only love him.”

Days later I was on the phone with my mother, a devout Catholic who begins every day praying the rosary and often going to church for mass. Mom was recovering from a skin cancer treatment that was taking excruciatingly long to heal. The pain was severe, and my independent, strong-willed mother was being sidelined by mobility issues.

Toward the end of the conversation I said, “You know, Mom, if you were a parishioner, I might ask you, ‘Where is God in this?’” Similar to my friend who had been caring for her husband, my mother responded without hesitation, “God is everywhere in this. When I feel the pain, I give thanks to God for the great life I have had. I think about how I’m eighty-six years old and how healthy I have been for most of my life. It makes me grateful. When I feel the pain, I offer it up to God.”

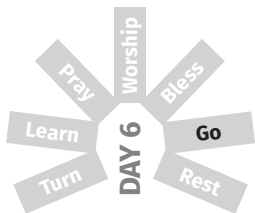
Reflecting on these two encounters, I know that both my friend and my mother inspire me to seek the gifts that can come from difficult situations. Recognizing these gifts is not a surface-level response that denies the struggle. Cultivating eyes that can see gift in hard times comes from courageously acknowledging the struggle. These are eyes that have been steeped in prayer and gratitude before the hard times come.

Reflect

What challenges are you facing today?

Where are you afraid, or in pain? How might God be blessing you even in the midst of the struggle?

How might others be blessed if you humbly share your story?



Warming

Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

(Matt. 25:44–45)

Temperatures had dipped well below freezing for days on end. Warming stations were set up throughout the city to provide shelter for those living on the streets. The community of Grace Episcopal Church in Woodlawn did what they had always done—opened their doors.

Grace Church is in the epicenter of the poverty earthquake. However, rather than withdraw into a mentality of scarcity, this congregation, which is often stretched thin, gives sacrificially. Every day they feed those who are hungry. Every day they clothe those who are naked. Every day they pray with those wrestling with the ravages of mental illness.

After weeks of providing shelter, a plea was issued via social media, “Grace Woodlawn needs volunteers to staff their warming station.” The small, generous congregation

couldn't do it all on their own. Congregants had to go to work, take care of their children, tend to their lives. They couldn't possibly spend another night on a cot or hand out another cup of cocoa. We, in the greater community, were summoned to provide relief.

Our home is nearly equidistant to Grace Woodlawn and the parish where I serve, Saint Luke's in Mountain Brook, Alabama. We are 2.8 miles to Grace and 2.6 miles to Saint Luke's. The experiences of those living in these two communities are worlds apart. Although our home is in the middle, our lives trend more toward the Saint Luke's world than that of Grace Woodlawn.

My husband, Malcolm, and I signed up for a mere two-hour slot on a Friday afternoon. Malcolm is a frequent celebrant for "Church in the Park," a weekly service dedicated to providing Good News and good food to those living in the margins. Malcolm is at home with the homeless. He comfortably chatted with the men—meeting them as equals, honoring their inherent dignity.

More than one of the men and women said to me, "Thank you, ma'am, for your help." Or, "We are so grateful to this church and the community. You are a lifesaver." I was humbled knowing that what I was giving was insignificant in comparison to their gratitude, and to the sacrifices made by others.

Most of my time was spent talking to Mother Robyn, the rector at Grace Woodlawn. She told me how Kay, their "deacon-in-training," had spent every night on a cot and every day at work. I learned how Robyn's community had

Warming

been cooking and serving and loving those who needed shelter. When I pointed out to Robyn, with a voice not free of guilt, how different our lives are—me a priest at a well-resourced congregation, and she the priest at Grace Woodlawn, she immediately responded. “There isn’t anywhere else I want to be. My life here isn’t perfect, and I get frustrated, but I love my people, and I will always be on the side of the least of these.” No heroics, no smug sense of self-importance, no judgment of my privileged life. “There isn’t anywhere else I *want* to be.”

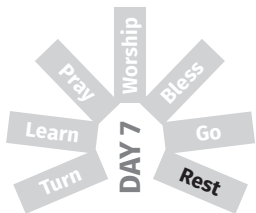
Malcolm and I walked toward our car at the end of our shift and bumped into Jim and Nancy, Saint Luke’s parishioners who had come to provide comfort and support—smiling, generous human bridges in the divide between two worlds. I knew from previous conversations that they had started a nonprofit in another state, an organization that provides backpacks filled with food for thousands of hungry students. Later they shared with me how much their evening at Grace Church meant to them—how they were inspired by the joyful, multigenerational Muslim community that provided dinner that evening.

As is always the case, my encounters at Grace Church Woodlawn and whenever I *think* I am showing up to support someone else, it is I who benefits greatly. There is no romanticizing the horrors of poverty and of violence. Yet, my chance meetings with those who walk bravely into the darkness, shining the light of Christ, continue to inspire me to be mindful of those whose lives are different from mine, to listen and learn from them.

Reflect

Where are you being encouraged to “show up”?

Is there a community or a person that is living in circumstances different from your own that you would like to connect with? Learn from? Perhaps you are drawn to collaborate on a project that will benefit those in need.



Freedom

“Six days shall work be done; but the seventh day is a sabbath of complete rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no work: it is a sabbath to the Lord throughout your settlements.” (Lev. 23:3)

Assuming we would forget, God gave us a day to remember that we are free and that we are God’s beloved people. Sabbath was a gift from God to a people who had been oppressed. It was a reminder to the Israelites that they were free—free to rest and free to worship. Neither of which were available to them in captivity.

Years ago when I started an end-of-life care nonprofit, Project Compassion, I found it impossible to rest. Mind racing with creative ideas, or funding woes, or the burden of unanswered e-mails, I would frequently rise at 4:00 a.m. and begin my day. When I wasn’t working, I was tending to the life of our family. It seemed everyone had a piece of me except for God, and for me.

My zest to change the world became “the bread of anxious toil” and it showed in the way that I treated people. My children became the recipients of sharp admonitions. My husband was given little grace when he made mistakes.

One day a dear friend called to ask if we could go for a walk to talk about something that was weighing on her. We were usually accompanied by our dogs on our treks, but she indicated there were to be no distractions for this conversation. Our feet barely hit the trail before she blurted out, “You are being so unkind to James, I am afraid it is undermining all of the good we are trying to do.” Ouch! “Besides, he doesn’t deserve to be spoken to that way. No one does.”

I was indignant. How could anyone question my motives or the way I was treating others in the organization? I had *started* this thing. It couldn’t manage without me. And yet, this was a friend who had given as much or more to the organization than I had. This was a friend who was a *cheerleader*, an *encourager*. Rarely, if ever, had I heard her express herself in this way.

After the initial sting of the rebuke faded, trusting the source, I took time to reflect. I realized my busyness had made me toxic. Resentment and ego and grief and self-importance and worry and ambition had created a noxious stew within me. Unchecked by those things which usually ground me, like time in prayer, or undistracted space with the people I love, or doing things that bring me joy, I had forgotten who I was. I had forgotten Whose I was. This hard wake-up call was a gift, a reminder that I am free at least one day a week from the stresses of work, and that I am God’s beloved—even when I’m acting like a jerk.

Freedom

“To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his or her work for peace.” —Thomas Merton¹⁰

Reflect

Are you stressed out? Or are you experiencing a sense of contentment with your work/life balance? If you are stretched, who is impacted by your overwork? How?

What one thing might you say “no” to that will allow a “yes” to time in prayer, rest, and/or an activity that brings you joy?

What one thing would you love to do if you designated time for sabbath rest? Give yourself the gift of an hour, or half a day, or a whole day tending to sabbath.

10. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1968), 81.