

# Receiving Jesus

The  
Way of  
Love

MARIANN EDGAR BUDDE



*For the people  
of the Episcopal Diocese  
of Washington*



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# INTRODUCTION



Jesus said “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” —John 15:1–4

**IN DECEMBER 2017** the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, invited a small group of Episcopal Church leaders to help him think through an issue that was troubling him.

We in the Episcopal Church have been inspired by Bishop Curry’s preaching for years, long before his sermon at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle catapulted his message of love onto the world stage. Since his election as our presiding bishop in 2015, he has been preaching and teaching around the country, calling upon every member of the Episcopal Church to renew our commitment to Jesus and his message of love for the world. The energy around the presiding bishop, both within and outside the Episcopal Church, has been electrifying. Presiding Bishop Curry wants only to speak of Jesus, the one sent by God to show us all how to live and how to love. He is, in essence, a one-man revival. “The church is not an institution,” he reminds us any chance he gets, “the church is a movement.” Every time he speaks, we in the Episcopal Church cheer. But what exactly does that mean?

At our December 2017 gathering, Michael Curry wanted to talk about evangelism strategy. For while there are shining examples of spiritual vitality and growth in some Episcopal churches across the country, many of our congregations are struggling simply to survive. Even when we consider the strongest of our churches, the overall trends of decline are sobering. Despite Bishop Curry's current public stature, in the United States the majority of people under the age of fifty have no idea who we are and what our deepest hopes are for our world. Sadly, the treasure of the Episcopal Church, for many, remains hidden under the bushel basket of institutional decline.

Thus for two days we prayed and wondered together how best to be faithful to Jesus and his movement. What more could the presiding bishop do? What could we do, not merely to ensure the mere survival of our churches, but that they might thrive as vibrant spiritual communities and compelling witnesses to Jesus's message of love?

Part of the problem, we told ourselves, is that Episcopalians are hesitant to speak about our faith. We almost never invite our friends and neighbors to join us in worship or small group gatherings. Moreover, we seem inordinately attached to our preferences in worship. We like to think of church communities as warm, welcoming, and inclusive, but given our institutional decline, it is highly unlikely that others experience us that way. At our gathering, we acknowledged that the trends of decline suggest that the Episcopal Church is not a particularly compelling witness to the gospel. Clearly, we need to do more than trying harder to make our presence known and be more welcoming.

After hours of conversation, someone in our group asked the presiding bishop what concerned him most. "I worry," Presiding Bishop Curry said quietly, "that the majority of people in our churches do not know for themselves the unconditional love of God. I suspect that the reason they are hesitant to speak of Jesus is because they don't know him as their personal Lord and Savior." He paused. "How can we share what we don't have?"

The room went silent. I found myself thinking back to something I had recently read of how Christians experience the Holy Spirit in a book on the essentials of the Christian faith by Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton:

When we speak about the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, we are speaking of God's active work in our lives; of God's way of leading us, guiding us, forming and shaping us; of God's power and presence to comfort and encourage us and to make us the people God wants us to be. The Spirit is the voice of God whispering, wooing and beckoning us. And in listening to this voice and being shaped by this power, we find that we become most fully and authentically human.<sup>1</sup>

Hamilton goes on:

I think that many Christians live Spirit-deficient lives, a bit like someone who is sleep-deprived, nutrient-deprived, or oxygen-deprived. Many Christians haven't been taught about the Spirit, nor encouraged to seek the Spirit's work in their lives. As a result, our spiritual lives are a bit anemic as we try living the Christian life by our own power and wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

As I heard the presiding bishop speak and recalled Adam Hamilton's words, it was as if God were holding a mirror to my face. I had to acknowledge to myself and before God that on most days, I try to live and lead from my own power and wisdom. In over thirty years of ordained leadership, my daily default position is to assume that everything depends on me. Intellectually, I know that's not the gospel. Never once does Jesus say, "It's all up to you." Rather he says things like, "I am the vine; you are the branches." He is the source

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1. Adam Hamilton, *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, 965.

2. *Ibid*, 1066.

of our strength. We are the branches, only able to share what we receive from him. Yet knowledge isn't enough: as a Christian—and most certainly as a leader of other Christians—I need daily reminders, and lived experience, of the fundamental truth that apart from Jesus, I can do nothing.

Bishop Curry told us that he wants to spend his remaining years as our spiritual leader helping all people experience the love of God made known to us in Jesus, and to follow Jesus in that way of love. He wants the Episcopal Church to be known for our commitment to follow in Jesus's way of love. We were unanimous in our desire to join in that endeavor; together we dreamed of what a spiritual rule of life for the Episcopal Church might look like. The circle soon grew wider to include among the most gifted teachers, writers, and preachers in the Episcopal Church. From an extraordinarily rich collaborative endeavor, *The Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life* was born.

## A Spiritual Rule of Life

The term, “a rule of life,” is simply religious language for something we all do whenever we decide to direct intentional effort toward an overarching goal. The kind of goal that a rule of life points to isn't an accomplishment, but rather a way of being in the world. For example, in an academic setting, while it's possible to pass an exam by furiously studying the night before, mastery of a given subject matter requires continual study over time. A rule of life means following daily practices that would lead to such mastery. In the realm of physical health, while it's possible to lose weight on a starvation diet, sustained health requires daily habits of proper eating and exercise. Those habits constitute a rule of life for our health. Similarly, if we want to have a healthy relationship with money, a financial rule of life would entail adopting a budget and living within its means.

A spiritual rule of life is comprised of specific practices that help us pay attention and respond to the presence of God. It is a conscious effort on our part to be open to the love of God in Jesus, to receive that love for ourselves, and then offer love to others as we feel called. If we adhere to a few essential spiritual practices over time, they gradually shape our character and determine the course of our lives.

The writer Brian McLaren describes the power of spiritual practices this way:

Spiritual practices are those actions within our power that help us narrow the gap between the character we want to have and the character we are actually developing. They're about surviving our twenties or forties or eighties and not becoming a jerk in the process. About not letting what happens to us deform or destroy us. About realizing that what we earn or accumulate means nothing compared to what we become and who we are. Spiritual practices are about life, about training ourselves to become the kinds of people who have eyes and actually see, and who have ears and actually hear, and so experience not just survival but life that is real, worth living, and good.<sup>3</sup>

McLaren goes on to say that our character—the kind of people we are—determines how much of God we can experience, and maybe even which version of God we experience. Thus, there's a lot at stake here for us, for it is through spiritual practices that we learn to love God.<sup>4</sup>

The primary goal of the Way of Love is for us to grow in our love for Jesus as we experience his love for us. The second is to grow in our capacity to love others as Jesus loves. The kind of

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3. Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 14.

4. *Ibid.*, 18.



love we're aiming for isn't a feeling that washes over us, as wonderful as that feeling of love can be. Rather, it is sustained and sometimes sacrificial effort. In the words of Paul, this is love that is patient and kind; love that is not arrogant or boastful or rude; love that believes, hopes and endures all things; love that never ends (1 Cor. 13:1–13). Growing in our capacity to both receive and offer such love is the fruit of a life that is connected to love of Jesus, as a branch is to the vine. The practices of the Way of Love help us stay connected.

If we're honest, most of us feel inadequate when it comes to the disciplines of our faith. I know that I do. But here's something to remember about spiritual practices: they aren't meant to be chores to plow through or exercises to whip us into spiritual shape. In the words of the Benedictine nun Joan Chittister, "A relationship with God is not something to be achieved." Rather, she writes, "God is a presence to which we can respond." Nor is the spiritual life separate from the rest of our lives, but rather, "a way of being in the world that is open to God and open to others."<sup>5</sup> Spiritual practices help open us to God's presence.

The seven practices of the Way of Love are not, for the most part, dramatic gestures, but rather small steps we take whose impact will be felt over time. Nor is this a program explicitly designed to fix the challenges we face as a church in institutional decline. There is no guarantee that even if every Episcopalian decided to follow the Way of Love that we would reverse the trends of shrinking membership. On the other hand, if we never engage in these practices, or others like them, we may not have a church worth saving. The church isn't a building, an institution, a small community desperate to survive. It is, as the presiding bishop loves to remind us, a gathering of people who have

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5. Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *The Rule of St. Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 27.

heard the call to follow Jesus in his way of love for the world, person by person, community by community.

## The Seven Practices

The first practice in a Jesus-focused life is to *turn*—turn our gaze, our mind, our thoughts, our attention to Jesus. Simple as it sounds, it is the foundational practice, referring back to the first conscious decision we made, or have yet to make, to be a follower of Jesus. To turn also describes the daily decision to focus our attention on Jesus, asking for his guidance and grace.

The second practice is to *learn*, to commit each day to some form of learning, reading the Bible, or listening to devotional material focused on Jesus's teachings. Sometimes the learning process involves deep engagement through a class or study; other times, it's a small, daily encounter with sources of wisdom and inspiration. What matters most here isn't the quantity of our learning, but the steady commitment to take in a bit of insight each day.

The third practice, to *pray*, flows naturally from the first and second, yet also stands alone. We pray at all times and places. I have realized that sitting down in the same place every day for even a few minutes has a quiet, yet powerful impact on my life. It's a time to sort through and settle my thoughts, as murky water settles in stillness and allow bits of clarity to emerge. It's a time to speak my heart, often with sighs instead of words, before God. And it's a time to listen. We may not hear anything in the silence, but we might. And we never will hear anything from God if we don't take time to listen.

In terms of time, we can commit ourselves to *turn*, *learn*, and *pray* each day in as little as fifteen minutes a day. We can always spend more time, but the benefit comes with the habit of setting aside time, no matter the amount. It's best to start small.

The fourth practice, to *worship*, moves us from the personal to the collective. Following Jesus is a communal endeavor and we

cannot grow in the ways of love on our own. We are nourished in faith through worship as we pray and sing together and open ourselves to the mysteries of sacrament. Theologian Norman Wirzba writes, “The church at its best is like a school that trains people in the way of love, an unusual school that lasts a lifetime and from which we never really graduate.”<sup>6</sup> We apprentice ourselves to one another in Christian community and together experience Christ’s presence.

The fifth practice, to *bless*, takes us out of our lives and churches and into the world around us. To bless, that is, to speak words of kindness and affirmation, is perhaps the loveliest and most understated of spiritual practices. Celtic author and poet John O’Donohue describes blessing as a lost art form. “The world can be harsh and negative,” he writes, “but if we remain generous and patient, kindness inevitably reveals itself. Something deep in the human soul seems to depend on the presence of kindness; something instinctive in us expects it, and once we sense it, we are able to trust and open ourselves.”<sup>7</sup> Each day we are given countless opportunities to speak kindness into another person’s life, to offer a word of hope in times of uncertainty.

The sixth practice, to *go*, is for many the most challenging. This is the call to cross the borders of our familiarity in order to better understand the experience of another. The great criminal justice reformer of our time, Bryan Stevenson, speaks of being proximate to suffering, getting close to those who bear the brunt of our society’s ills and coming to know them as neighbors and friends.<sup>8</sup>

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6. Norman Wirzba, *Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 8.

7. John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 185.

8. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014), 14.

Walking in the way of love requires us to show up in those places where love is needed most.

The final practice, to *rest*, is also one many struggle with and may well be the most countercultural for our time. Yet we are mortal, and our souls and bodies are restored in rest. To rest is to remember that we are not alone and that not everything depends on us. We can lay our burdens down and make space in our lives for renewal and the things that make for joy. Scripture teaches that sabbath isn't something we earn; it is our birthright as children of God.

Seven may seem like a daunting number of spiritual practices, and it would be if the goal was to check them off each day as tasks on our spiritual to-do list. I have found it helpful to ponder the seven practices over the course of a week, a month, and even a season of my life. We may be drawn, for our soul's sake, to a season of learning; we may feel an internal nudge to go beyond ourselves in some small or significant way. At the outset, you might ask: Which of the seven practices come easily for you? With which do you struggle? Is there one that speaks with particular urgency, as something your life needs right now?

The purpose of these intentional practices is to open ourselves to experience Jesus with us. So often we think of the Christian faith as an obligation, or as a set of beliefs that we must hold. There are obligations and beliefs, but if we get stuck there, we can lose sight of—or never experience at all—what is most important: Jesus's invitation to experience a loving, personal relationship with God. No matter our struggles and doubts, no matter our past sins or persistent failings, our relationship with God is one we can trust. In God we can find refuge and solid ground upon which to stand.

The Way of Love is the journey of a lifetime. It's a way of knowing God, receiving and sharing Jesus's love, and being a blessing to the world. As you read the reflections that follow, may you experience something of God's light and love for you.