

# WALKING THE WAY OF LOVE

Edited by Courtney Cowart



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## INTRODUCTION

# An Invitation to Walk the Way of Love

Courtney Cowart

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**T**he other day a friend in New York took me to meet James Kim, a gifted spiritual guide to people of all generations. As we were visiting, I made a remark to Kim about being a mentor and spiritual teacher, but he immediately rejected that label. “I am not a teacher. I am not a guru,” he said. “I am simply a reminder.”

As I began to edit the chapters of this book, Kim’s comment came back to me. On many levels, these reflections on the seven practices of the Way of Love are reminders. For some, they are reminders of truths from a lifetime of spiritual experience treasured deep in our hearts. For many of us, these will be reminders of good intentions and unsatisfied spiritual yearnings. For others, these are reminders of hopeful and inspiring recent events in the life of the Episcopal Church.

When Bishop Curry opened the 74th General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Austin, Texas, in July 2018, he asked each

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of us to commit more deeply to our journeys as disciples by engaging the ancient practices of the Way of Love.

That July the presiding bishop started with his own reminder: a passage from the Gospel of John, when Jesus turns to his disciples at the Last Supper and says, “As the Father has loved me so have I loved you. Now abide in my love.” Bishop Curry continued:

When [Jesus] knew their world would fall apart, when he knew uncertainty and ambiguity was in the air, when he knew that he did not know for sure, or precisely, what lay ahead, and all he could do was trust the Father, and leave it in the Father’s hands. . . . [I]t is then that he said to them what he may be saying to us, “I am the vine, you are the branches. I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me and I in you, . . . for apart from me you can do nothing. But abide in me and you will bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.”<sup>1</sup>

In that moment, the presiding bishop gave us Jesus’s definition of a disciple: one who practices abiding in Jesus’s love.

Then Bishop Curry asked another question: how do we abide in Jesus’s love? To answer that question, he referenced the text you just read in his foreword, the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*, who warned if you approach relationship with Jesus in a

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1. Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry, sermon at the opening Eucharist of the 79th General Convention. Austin, TX, July 5, 2018.

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mechanical, legalistic way, you'll stumble. The way to really live into being a disciple, the way to abide in Jesus's love, is to throw yourself completely into the arms of the living God.

Archbishop Rowan Williams made much the same point in his enthronement sermon as the 104th archbishop of Canterbury when he reminded us, "We do not solve our problems with better discipline. What we need is better discipleship." The journey is about passionate relationship, he said, "entering into the intimate joy of Jesus's life," "moving into the radiant mystery of Christ." He continued:

This is the opposite of treating the mystery of Jesus as something we can think about at arms' length, as an interesting phenomenon that has nothing really to do with how we live and die. In Matthew 11, Jesus rounds on those who do and says in essence, "I don't want your idle curiosity or I don't want your patronage. There is a secret that you haven't a clue about—and the ones who know that secret are the ones who don't try to protect themselves by staying at a safe distance."<sup>2</sup>

Instead, they throw themselves into the arms of the living God; hurl their lives into the hands of Jesus. Archbishop Rowan concluded by suggesting who models this Way for us:

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2. Rowan Williams, sermon preached at his enthronement as the 104th archbishop of Canterbury, Canterbury Cathedral, February 27, 2003.

[I]t's time for you to listen to those who know their need. For them God is immediate—not an idea, not a theory, but life, food, air. . . . We can't know fully who God is and what God gives unless we are willing to abide—to stand in the same place as Jesus, in the full flood of the divine life poured out in mercy and renewal. It's only in the water that you can begin to swim.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the chapters of this book you will hear many descriptions of where Jesus abides for those who know their need, and how we can seek through practice to join him in the flood of divine life, receiving mercy and renewal. We are all invited to dive into this water and swim.

Each contributor to this book shares a passionate conviction that it is time to remember, or perhaps to discover for the first time, how spiritual practice leads us into this experiential relationship with Jesus. While each chapter takes a unique approach to the topic of a given practice, all are clearly writing from an experience and witness of God's immediacy in the context of Christian life and practice. We are all walking together, and our lives are changed because of that commitment.

## **A Common Journey**

The contributors also hold in common a more specific journey: our offerings began to take shape in retreat with Presiding Bishop Curry

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3. Ibid.

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in December 2017. It was in retreat together that we articulated for the first time as a group why engaging Jesus's practices as individuals and as a church matters, and how Christian spiritual practices are linked to reinvigorating our collective relationship with God. Those insights and hopes shape much of what you will read in the pages that follow.

When we gathered in Atlanta, we recognized the great challenge before us: the decline of the church in the United States is in part due to our failure to help people make spiritual meaning of their lives. Some of the struggle is simply the age in which we live. As scholar and priest Dwight Zscheile admits in his chapter on the practice of Learn, "In a secular age, it is very difficult for people to imagine and be led by the power and presence of God."

However, for that very reason, as Bishop Robert Wright reminds us in his chapter on the practice of *Go*, our witness today matters perhaps more than ever. In a time when Christianity is countercultural, and deep, faithful discipleship in a secular context is more challenging, "[w]e are here in this millennium, this century, this decade, this year, month and day because we are *supposed* to be here. . . . [W]e are also the people suited to help God turn the world right-side-up by following Jesus now." We have been chosen for such a time as this.

While this recognition of our calling as disciples bestows great dignity and purpose, it can also feel daunting. As priest and spiritual leader Jesús Reyes names in his chapter on creating a *Rule of Life*, our commitments to grow in faithfulness and deepen our relationship with God do not depend on our efforts only; rather, all our efforts

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are saturated in grace. As is often said, there is a reason we call these *practices*. Br. David Vryhof of the Society of St. John the Evangelist reassures us in his chapter on *Pray* that prayer is God's gift to us, not a duty or a chore, and that we may rest assured "God appreciates all our attempts."

As much as the Way of Love provides a way for us to reclaim Christian voice and witness, it is also a way for us to make an interior return to God and to find stillness in the presence of God as a way to discover our deepest moral alignment and integrity. Scholar and sociologist Catherine Meeks names this gift in her chapter on the practice of *Turn*. "There must be a way for the followers of Jesus today to find our own deep connections to the divine. We can come to understand the inner community that lives in our hearts and minds, so that we are more free to listen to the same still, small voice of God that spoke to the prophet Elisha."

Indeed, there is a way. It is Jesus's Way of Love. In Frank Logue's chapter on *Worship*, we see how all the practices come together to lead us to our home in God. "[I]n worship we turn, learn, and pray as a gathered body and so are empowered to bless and go before we pause once more, finding our rest in God alone."

### **Preparing to Walk**

The other day I was reading a little book by the Jewish mystic Martin Buber, titled *The Way of Man*. Buber writes about the first practice

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Christianity shares with Judaism, which we have called *Turn*. To turn, Buber says, we must become the ones who search our hearts and come to say, like Adam, in and before God, “I hid myself.”<sup>4</sup> As a first step, we must admit that.

Then, in that context and with that admission and self-reminder before God, the spiritual practices of prayer and worship, the study of Scripture, reaching out to bless our neighbor, going to meet and embrace the stranger, each in different ways make us vulnerable, remind us of our need, keep our hearts open, and cause us to keep reaching for God. This is how the practices begin to awaken us and destroy the various systems we devise to hide out from God. The practices that strip our illusions are essential, because, as Buber teaches, “If we drown the Voice of God or hide from the face of God, our life will never become a *way*.”<sup>5</sup>

If we do turn and we do begin to emerge from hiding, the Way of Love practices have the power to wake us up spiritually each and every day. They are transformative if we engage them with the intention to expose our lives to God’s gentle recreation of us through them, as we pray each reader will.

If there is another spiritual giant whose influence and inspiration is woven through the chapters of this book, it is the great mystic and mentor of Martin Luther King Jr., Howard Thurman. More than

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4. Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, Book IV: *Hasidism and Modern Man* (1958; Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 126.

5. *Ibid.*

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one of the contributors reference him prominently, and I suspect his wisdom was in the hearts of many more as we wrote. Many of us who have worked on the Way of Love consider him one of our greatest influences.

In the vocational discernment work I have done with communities, congregations, and individuals over the past fourteen years, one of my favorite centering reflections draws on Thurman's wisdom. It has proven almost foolproof in helping all sorts of people learn how not to drown out the Voice of God.

The practice is very simple: we read the passage below and then divide into triads to engage storytelling. We do what several of the authors you will read strongly advocate, and that is to take the time to listen deeply to one another's stories about times when we heard the Voice of God, or as Thurman calls it, the "Sound of the Genuine." We also create space for people to share stories of times we hid from that voice. This can indeed be a threshold practice as one begins to transform one's "life" into Jesus's "way."

In closing, I invite you to close your eyes, center yourself in the presence of God, and pause for just a minute to dedicate yourself to this journey of practice, listening for sound of the Voice of God. Drop your attention from your head down into your heart, breathe into that space and feel it opening. Then ask God to enter and show you God's abiding presence already within you.

Here are Howard Thurman's profound words, which encapsulate the purpose of each practice you will dwell with along the Way of Love. Consider his words a kind of prelude and summary of our prayer for you and for all of us on the path Jesus walked first:

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There is in every person something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself [or himself]. . . . There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. Nobody like you has ever been born and no one like you will ever be born again—you are the only one. . . .

If you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching. . . . If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls. . . .

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you. Don't be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams, your ambitions that you don't hear the sound of the genuine in you. Because that is the only true guide that you will ever have and if you don't have that you don't have a thing.<sup>6</sup>

May you listen and hear the Voice of God—the sound of the genuine—flowing through you every moment. When you turn and study sacred texts, when you pray and worship, when you bless others and engage the stranger, when you take times of rest and return to the journey—in all that you say and do, may you listen for the One who accompanies you.

And know this: we also walk with you.

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6. Howard Thurman, “The Sound of the Genuine,” baccalaureate address at Spelman College, Atlanta, GA, May 4, 1980.