

Millions of people were inspired by the sermon our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, preached at the royal wedding last year. So much so that this week he received an award for it. In his sermon, Bishop Curry quoted Martin Luther King jr who said, "We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way." Love is the only way.

And so the Episcopal Church is encouraging us to think about our life as disciples of Christ on the Way of Love, a path which involves seven basic practices. Seven basic practices that support and embrace our mission to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our world.

When I think about the power of love, I tend to think about sacrificial acts of caring. I think about the Abundance Shop volunteers who sort through tons of clothes and household goods, who welcome neighbors and friends with the love of God. I think of members of this church caring for Sandy as she died last fall, as she died not under a bush but in a small trailer surrounded by loving people. I think of those who have given sacrificially of time and money to support JW since his arrest just before Christmas. I think of each of you who cook meals, who listen carefully, who quietly care for others in unobtrusive ways.

What I don't immediately think of is prayer.

Yet prayer is the third action on the seven-fold Way of Love. So I have thinking about how and when prayer is love.

Most of us tend to pray when something is going wrong in our lives or the life of someone we love. We pray for help, we pray for healing. And this is clearly an expression of love – we don't so often pray for those who annoy us or those whom we dislike, though that too is an act of love.

But I think there is a bigger sense in which prayer is love – one which we see in the life of Jesus. He and his Father, his Abba, were tight. They were deeply in love with one another. In fact the love between them is so great that theologians have inferred that that love is what gives rise to the Holy Spirit. What nurtured that love during Jesus' earthly life was prayer.

I suspect that prayer is the basis for what Dr. King called the “redemptive power of love”. As we pray we are transformed. As we are transformed so the world around us is transformed. Prayer draws us closer to God and prayer makes us more like the Christ.

This kind of prayer is different from quick arrow prayers – the emergency prayers. This kind of prayer is a much deeper communion with God which only happens when we make time and space for it. I confess that I am not good at making time for this kind of prayer but I know that when I do it makes a difference.

There’s nothing wrong with emergency prayer; there’s nothing wrong with turning to God when we are in trouble. We saw Jesus doing that at Gethsemane. “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Matt 26:39) But the Way of Love calls to go deeper, so that we may be transformed by our experience of God’s love expressed to us in that time of prayer.

Perhaps it’s a bit like doing a jigsaw. You *can* do it without looking at the picture on the box. But it’s going to take much longer than if you look at the picture so you know that most of the dark blue-green is to the left and the yellow swirls are at the top right and so on. When we pray in a way that enables us to bask in the unconditional love of God, it is like seeing the bigger picture – the picture on the box. We don’t know how the little piece that is ours today, the piece that we turn this way and that trying to make sense of it, we don’t know how that fits - but when we sit in the presence of God in prayer we get to know that there is a big picture. And in that big picture, we are God’s beloved and she is ours. In that big picture, everything fits and we can relax.

That’s why when we gather for common prayer we start our time of worship with a hymn of praise: it’s why praise is an important part of prayer – not only is it the energy that powers the universe, but it helps us take our eyes off our little puzzle piece and look at the big picture. The big picture where all things are brought into balance as the love of God embraces and redeems the universe. The big picture where “the redemptive power of love ...makes of this old world a new world.”

Prayer is not primarily a transaction. It’s not like a vending machine or an ATM where you put in the right money or the right number and you get what you want

out of the slot. Neither is it as random as a slot machine where you pray and pray and hope that one day you will get the right prayer and hit the jackpot.

Rather, prayer is a relationship. I find it helpful to think of God as like water. If you have ever had a leak or a flood in your home, you know how water can get just about anywhere and everywhere. So, let's imagine God is like water flowing through the whole of the cosmos –so although we seem to be separate beings, we are all connected by the flowing of God? And if we are all connected, then when we send our love and our caring to another, when we align our wills with God's will for healing and justice, then it is powerful. It adds energy, positive energy to the situation and assists in bringing greater wholeness and peace.

So God does not make a decision whether or not to answer our prayers. God uses our prayers and loves our prayers. God is delighted whenever we turn to her. Our prayers always add to the healing of the universe. Our prayers are an important part of the redemptive power of love, but they may not always lead to the outcome that we think would be best. Instead God is empowered by us – God is empowered and this is where the power of prayer comes in – God is empowered by our love and by our request for wholeness. For God never intervenes against our will, and we know from the Biblical witness that God is motivated and acts on the cries of God's people. When we invite God into a situation, we can be sure that God responds and God is present and our desire for healing enables a greater degree of healing than would otherwise be present, and from that come miracles.

In prayer, we can fulfil both of the two great commandments: to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. When we are aligned with God in love then we can join our human energy and intention with divine intention, and in that alignment we can listen to God and hear what he has to say.

In the reading from Acts this morning we heard about the remarkable dream or vision that Peter had when he was praying. He saw a sheet descend from heaven and on it were unclean foods, and God told him to eat but Peter said no – how could he eat something that was unclean? Then God told him, "What God has made clean you must not call unclean." It was this dream that made him realize that the barrier between Jew and Gentile was a human invention not a God given

law. Peter was changed by his prayer because he was open to the Spirit of God directing his thoughts.

Sometimes we behave as though prayer is us telling God what to do. But the deep prayer of love is one of relationship in which God can transform us and help us to see the world differently.

Personally I find it difficult to pray for long using words. I run out of things to say or I get boringly repetitive. So for me, Centering Prayer is ideal for sitting with God in prayer. In the silence I can open myself to God's loving presence and in the silence I attempt to respond to that love by letting go of all the important thoughts that rush into my mind – it is just time given to God with no personal agenda. Just time for sitting together in love. I know others who find that same connection through art or music or walking on the beach. There are many different ways to be in love with God.

"We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way."

Let me finish with a poem by the Sufi poet, Rumi,

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty  
and frightened. Don't open the door to the study/  
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.  
Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.