

In just a few short days, following his sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has emerged as somewhat of a sensation. His sermon on love at the royal wedding opened up a conversation both here and abroad. A very important conversation.... Upon his return from England, Curry made the rounds of the morning TV shows, appeared on CNN and perhaps other places and appeared in all of these venues with an undeniable exuberance. His is a joyful presence and a joyful witness.

Last Thursday, Curry joined about 2000 in Washington D.C. in a campaign calling on people of faith to reclaim the name of Jesus. When he preached at the beginning of the evening at National City Christian Church, Bishop Curry once again returned to the subject of love:

**“Love your neighbor,” Curry said during the service. “Love the neighbor you like and the neighbor you don’t like. Love the neighbor you agree with and the neighbor you don’t agree with. Love your Democrat neighbor, your Republican neighbor, your black neighbor, your white neighbor, your Anglo neighbor, your Latino neighbor and your LGBTQ neighbor. Love your neighbor! That’s why we’re here!”**

The March in Washington to reclaim the name of Jesus was planned long in advance of our Bishop's invitation to preach at the royal wedding. It grew out of an ecumenical Lenten retreat in which leaders from various church traditions gathered and shared a common concern that the message and witness of Jesus was being ignored. Curry believes that now is the time to love and also now is a time in which the integrity of the Christian faith itself is at stake.

Does this have political implications? Well... yes, at least potentially. But Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* points out that in earliest times to be a Christian was a political statement--a political statement in which one risked his or her life. Love has political implications if we are truly to love our neighbor as ourselves. It does not have to be rancorous. It does not have to be partisan. But it has implications. Hence Curry's invitation *Love the neighbor you like and the neighbor you don't like. Love the neighbor you agree with and the neighbor you don't agree with.* In his interview with Don Lemon on CNN, Curry objected to the sentimentalizing of love and spoke about tough love. This is a love that can put us on our knees.

Our passages from Holy Scripture this morning provide us with various examples of persons being drawn into the circle of faith. Isaiah provides us with a quintessential example of being suddenly in the

presence of the holy. It is a Temple encounter, a sudden entrance into the presence of YHWH in a moment of worship in which YHWH is seen on a royal throne, in which the foundations shake and in which seraphs, with their six wings call to each other and proclaim the pure and radical holiness of G-d: *Holy, holy holy is the Lord of hosts/ the whole earth is full of his glory.* And Isaiah in response feels totally impure, lost, ushered into a realm in which he does not properly belong as a man of unclean lips living in a nation--a people of unclean lips.

That is our situation, even in the best of times. Against the radical holiness of our holy God, we are a people of unclean lips. And yet...in the midst of this recognition and perhaps because of it, we too have an opportunity to turn, to have that coal --a live coal charged with purity from the holy-- placed also upon our lips and into our lives. Holy moments are not reserved simply for ecstasy or for insight, they are opportunities for the direction of our very lives to be turned around until we understand the depth of our calling, the depth of our identity as followers of Jesus who have been loved, cleansed, and now summoned --to, among other things, actively love people we really do not like, people we really have problems with, people who make us uncomfortable. The love of Jesus puts us on our knees.

We should not forget that Isaiah, following his response --*Here I am send me.*-- entered into a life of great and enduring conflict.

And it was conflict that Nicodemus wanted to avoid. He came at night. Yet he was drawn into the circle of faith, not in one incredible moment as with Isaiah, but slowly until at the end he was willing to come, according to John, with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Jesus-- Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, finally coming, in my view, out into the light. Owning his faith...

Today is Trinity Sunday in which we acknowledge the community of God as Father, Son and Spirit; the unity of God as Father, Son and Spirit. The Rev Judith Jones of Wartburg Iowa points out the implied presence of Trinity in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. She states: *This well-known passage from John is a rarity in the Gospels because it shows Jesus discussing in some detail all three persons of the Trinity.* No, this is not a theological treatise. But Jesus speaks of God and God's kingdom, that is God's rule. Jesus speaks of the love of YHWH (for God so loved the world). Jesus speaks of the Son of Man-- the Son of Man sent from God and of the reality that the Son of Man will be lifted up. Lifted up has a cosmic dimension here. It refers not only to be lifted up on the cross, but also to that radical and cosmic lifting in which Jesus is once again ascended, lifted up into the presence of God from which to rule.

And then there is the Spirit. Jesus speaks of being born of the Spirit. He says in essence that no one can see, can grasp, can comprehend the kingdom of God in his words "without being born from above." This is what Nicodemus is searching for intellectually. He wants to comprehend. He is remarkably literal for being an educated man. He gets hung up on being literally born again. And it is here that Jesus speaks of Spirit. He speaks of wind blowing. *The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.* Nicodemus wants to plumb the mystery. Jesus wants Nicodemus to surrender to that same mystery. Faith is surrender, much as we might like to avoid it. Nicodemus wants faith to be intellectual grounded in earthly evidence. I don't blame him. But Jesus speaks of heavenly things. Jesus speaks of faith as being relational. *Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony.* Anselm: I do not understand in order that I might believe, but I believe in order that I might understand....

Finally...This relational dimension of being drawn into the circle of faith is also underscored by our reading from Paul's lengthy and challenging letter to the church at Rome, before he would visit it in chains.

In chains. Notice the joy and exuberance of this passage that speaks of relationship with the Holy that we also admit we cannot fathom and in whose presence we stand with unclean lips. We have been adopted, claimed. It is as if Paul is answering, centuries later, Isaiah's deep fear when he says *I am lost. I for I am a man of unclean lips!*

Paul exclaims: ***For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.***

God does not always like us. God does not sentimentalize us. God sees us through and through. We pray at the beginning of worship a Collect for Purity every Sunday which acknowledges *to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.* But God... loves us. Unhesitatingly claims us. God draws close when we turn and draw close to God in prayer. And when we dare to reach out and call Holy and Fearsome Mystery Abba, then, Paul says, *it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.* Children of the heavenly Father....

But there is one more line to that passage from Romans-- a phrase at the end that should remind us that Paul is in chains, will arrive in Rome in chains. The phrase: *if in fact we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

God's witness to us in Jesus is that love can actually be tough. It can be joyous but it also can lead to suffering. I am quite sure that Michael Curry's message in some quarters is going to be misunderstood.

And yet it does not matter. What matters is that you and I claim the presence of the Spirit of God, the Spirit of God still alive, still present, brooding over the dark and troubled world, where so many suffer, where so many go hungry, where so many are displaced by unrelenting hatred. Paul says *if we suffer with him*.

We should not assume that Jesus suffering is over. For he is suffering with us when we take the risk of suffering with others.

Today we read together Psalm 29 and the verse that reminds us: *The voice of YHWH is a powerful voice*. The Spirit can make that voice powerful within us. Jesus tells us that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. But we can be born of the Spirit. In relationship, the Spirit can guide and advise, the Spirit can console and comfort, the Spirit can give us that purpose and insight that we so sorely need, day by day.

A coal was placed upon his lips, a burning coal. And in response he said -- out into the charged space of the Temple in worship-- here I am. Send me. May we struggle and find out what it means, personally, for us to be those who are sent. Out into the world. Sent in love.

Jesus people.

In the name of God--Father Son and Spirit. Amen.