

The Leader's Way Podcast

Episode 6: A Case for Love with Michael Curry and Andrew McGowan

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry (MC): Because the truth is we can't do this by ourselves. I don't have what it takes to love unconditionally constantly. Because my unenlightened self gets in the way. Now my true self, it does...But with God I can.

Brandon: Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi.

Hannah: Hi, I'm Hannah Black.

B: And we're your hosts on "The Leader's Way," an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale University.

H: On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership, and transformation.

H: In May, 2023, nationally best-selling author, Deborah Royce mediated a dynamic conversation with presiding Bishop Michael Curry and Dean Andrew McGowan. This conversation celebrated the debut of grace-based films *A Case for Love*, a documentary based on Bishop Curry's teachings and writings. *A Case for Love* is hitting theaters January, 2024.

B: The most Reverend Michael Curry is the presiding Bishop and primate of the Episcopal Church. He's also an alumnus of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. He wrote in his book *Crazy Christians*: "If It's Not About Love, It's Not About God." The Very Reverend Dr. Andrew McGowan is Dean of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. In this conversation, Bishop Curry and Dean McGowan explore the centrality of love in Christianity.

H: Some of our listeners might know the most Reverend Michael Curry as the person who preached about love at Harry and Meghan's wedding. Of course, you and I know there's much more to Bishop Curry and you were even there that night for this conversation. What was it like?

B: I was there and there were hundreds of people in attendance and there was a kind of electricity in the air. As you say, Hannah, there is a power to Michael Curry's presence that's really rooted in his deep faith. He's a dynamic leader, and I think probably what makes him most dynamic as our leader here in the Episcopal Church is his commitment to empowering other people to use their gifts in serving God and God's people. So I'm really excited about this conversation.

H: Yeah, I love this. I've loved listening to it and I'm really excited that we get to share it with our listeners.

Deborah Royce (DR): So we had the chance to speak a couple of years ago by Zoom about your wonderful book, "Love is the Way" and that was on the heels of your, what was it, 13-and-a-half-minute sermon?

MC: We just, we mentioned the top one. One day with the word is a thousand. That is the example.

DR: And the theme is love and that's really it. And here we are, 2,000 years since the life of Jesus and we're reeling this conversation back to love and what I really loved about the movie is your messages taken in the film outside the four walls of the church. My mother used to always say, "Charity begins in the home." And I thought that meant she was a selfish person that she just wanted to keep it in her own family. And I didn't realize that she was saying exactly what you are saying, it's what can I do today? What is the little bit I can do? When you were part of this team envisioning this film, was that your idea well to really look at this outside of the church building?

MC: Yeah, this was an attempt to actually move the message which is at the core of the gospel of Jesus. I don't need to give you all the text. I mean Jesus has all these wonderful conversations with lawyers all the time. I suspect there's some in here. I mean, and several of them, one you get the parable of the Good Samaritan when they're talking about what does it mean to love the neighbor and to be neighbor to the other. And another you get Jesus saying, "Look, everything God's been trying to say in the Hebrew Scriptures and the prophets, everything, it all

depends on love of God and neighbor." The whole thing, you think about it. It's the most incredible thing.

Well, after the five-minute sermon in Windsor Castle, you just thought it was 13 minutes. It was really only five. But after that, I can't tell you how many times I ran into people and one of the earliest things they would say, I didn't know Christianity was about love.

We've been keeping it, the comfortable words inside the doors of the church. God so loved the world, or you know what I mean? And the truth is it's the core of the gospel, which somehow hasn't gotten spread as much as it can. And so I think part of what Brian, and everybody involved in it, what you guys were trying to do was how do we move beyond the beautiful red doors of the church and actually spread this message, which was at the core of Jesus and Jesus was basing it on Moses. Moses had already gotten it. So it was already ecumenical and interfaith. The nice thing about love, it is bipartisan, it is ecumenical, it is interfaith, it transcends all our boundaries. I have said to members of Congress, Republicans can do this, Democrats can do this, Independents can do this. And then I want you all to do it together and then we can actually get some legislation that does something for somebody else besides ourselves. And that's what love looks like in politics.
(audience applauding)

So this film was an attempt to actually take the gospel out into the world, which is what Jesus I think told us to do anyway.

DR: I think so. So you are presiding over this incredible academic institution and a spiritual institution all rolled into one, the seminary. So how do you work with your seminarians who come at all stages of life, inside the church, outside the church, how do you get them to go out in the world? Would you talk a little bit about that?

Dean Andrew McGowan (AM): Everyone in this room would easily sort of put their hand up to say, you know, do you want to be for love? You know, it's like motherhood, right? It's the easiest thing in the world to say that you're for, but the problem that we have, and we're already hearing this in the film as well as in the

conversation, is getting from the point of saying that it's something that we all believe in to working out how we actually make it work in the world. And I think that the thing that the seminary has to do, and this is perhaps mirroring what the church has to do, is to become people who know the story that has to be told so that that reality of love and the reality that the church is there for love can be told. Because you can get to a point where you can say, well, love, who is it going to be against love? Even though, I think you're right, and some of the people we heard from different faiths and traditions in the film were right, that love is something which is universal and interfaith and ecumenical, each of us actually has to come to it from the point of view of the particular story and the particular tradition within which we're called.

So we have a mission statement for Berkeley Divinity School. So if the chair of the board will forgive me for rewriting it just for this one moment. The mission of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale is to train people who will be effective storytellers of the love of God as made known in Jesus Christ our Lord. Because I think there is no excuse for being anything other than completely uncompromising about the fact that the story of Jesus is the story of love. And there is little point in gathering around the name of Jesus without thinking that that is about proclaiming the message of love. Not only to those who come within the doors, and this already came up in the movie as well, but to those who are outside the doors to whom those others will go back and tell it.

So if there is a difference between coming to church and coming to seminary, it's this. Everybody who comes into the door of the church wants to hear the story, but those who come to the seminary need to be equipped to be the tellers of the story, to remind other people of what the character of the gospel is and to understand not simply that we will say that the point is always love, because it always is, but that the point of Jesus is always love. And from the Christian point of view, to speak of love is always to speak of Jesus.

Now how do I do, considering that I've got such competition? There you go.
(audience applauding)

DR: So Bishop Curry, your story, having this extraordinary woman who entered

into your family's life, who did what needed to be done, she really is this embodiment of the idea that love is an action verb. It's not just a concept. And she speaks about you celebrating mass in the attic with or without the dolls, a point of debate.

MC: They were World War II soldiers. (laughing)

DR: So was that your path, like direct shot to Berkeley Divinity School? I wanna get to how you both got there.

MC: I went right from the attic to the seminary (laughing) no, no, no, it was a winding and security. I grew up, and Josie is a good example, who was in the film, and I can't remember if she talks about this later. She was for years the principal of St. Augustine School in Buffalo. This is in Buffalo, New York, and I just came back from Buffalo last weekend to commemorate the shootings there. But she was the principal of St. Augustine School, which was a collaboration of the Buffalo Public School System and the Episcopal Church. And it provided a way for girls who got pregnant in school, not to be kicked out of school, but to continue. This was before mainstreaming. There are more young women and now adult children of kids who went through the St. Augustine School run by that same woman.

And in the interviews, we tried to get Josie to say, "Why did you do that work?" She said, "That's what we're here to do." She just kept saying, "We have a duty and an obligation to make this world better." That's the point of it all. And also, Josie was an advocate for women's rights all the way across the board back in the 1960s because of that work at St. Augustine School. And this was a Christ-centered woman who was actually doing the work of love and compassion and justice in the name of Jesus in the public sphere, no separation of individual and interpersonal and social and political and educational. You see what I get? This is what we call, I think I learned this at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, what we call incarnation. (audience laughing) Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

And so I saw that modeled in her life, as well as my own father and the people who were that community that surrounded us also were people who were involved in the desegregation of the Buffalo Public School system. They were involved not

only in loving on individual levels, they were involved in translating love into justice and decency and equality and equity for all of God's children. So I literally grew up in a womb where love was incarnate, and it was in the name of Jesus. See, I mean, this was an Episcopal church. Now they were Episcopalians, they were quiet. They didn't get excited about it. But the message was clear. I remember when in 1963, it was part of some desegregation plan. I don't know the details, I was a kid.

And some of us who lived in what was East Buffalo, which was the black section then, which was where the top shooting was a year ago, the same area. And some of us in the fall of 63 were reassigned to a school across Main Street on the west side of town. It was Italian at that time, but predominantly white area. And that was a small desegregation effort. And I remember we got instructions over what to do and how to behave when we got to the school across Main Street in Sunday school.

That's why I'm saying this Jesus thing, this is about life. There is a wonderful Christmas hymn that nobody in America sings. I don't know if they sing it in Britain either, but it's the one, "Love came down at Christmas." That's the thing, love came down at Christmas. That's what's got the love that is the heart of God came down at Christmas, became flesh and dwelt and lived among us. And I literally grew up around folk who didn't say that, but they actually lived it.

I was 13 years old, and my daddy wanted me to do something I didn't want to do. You know, I didn't say anything. You didn't talk back to your parents and express yourself. But obviously my outward continent betrayed my inward thoughts. And he blurted out, you know, "the Lord didn't put you here just to consume the oxygen," which was a fascinating way of saying, "you know, you're not here just about yourself." You are supposed to consume oxygen and you give out carbon dioxide. And the plant world takes in that carbon dioxide and releases oxygen. You give them what they need; they give you what you need. Your job is to actually make a difference, participate in the world and you get blessed as well. This isn't about not getting blessed. I bless you, I get blessed. We all win. There are no losers. This is not a zero-sum game. This is how life is meant to be lived.

I just passionately believe that because I saw it in operation in people who really did struggle to make a difference in the life of that particular city and to see some of them now just this past weekend, commemorating those who lost their lives to hatred, and to see that community say, we're not going to yield to that. And to see the Buffalo Bills, never been prouder of them. They still haven't won a Super Bowl, but you just keep waiting. Before Jesus returns, they're gonna! But the Buffalo Bills had as their slogan, and they still have it today, "choose love. Choose love." Now when a football team grasps back in the midst of a killing in a city, what would happen if we grasped that in this country and in this world? We're talking about a game changer in life.

DR: Following up on that, how do we love the shooter? We are called to love everyone, the person who thinks differently. What do we have face to face with that shooter? What do we do with that?

MC: Now that's hard, you know, if you've lost a relative, that shooter, there's a lot of inward work. That takes a lot. I mean, Bishop Ruth Woodley Stanley's here somewhere. I know she's here. Oh, there's Ruthie. She's the Bishop of South Carolina. Charleston is in her diocese, and we were together some months ago at Mother Emanuel to commemorate the murders and assassination of the people there. Many of those family members are able to find ways to forgive. Others are not. That's a journey that we've all got to, there's no single shot way of working through grief. But here's what everybody can do. John Wesley, I'm a quote of Methodist, I know where I am, but I'm a quote of Methodist.

AM: Remember he was a priest of the Church of England. To his dying day.

MC: He died, that's right. That's right, I tell the Methodist bishops that all the time. Anyway, John Wesley used to say, "Do all the good you can in every way you can with everyone you can." I may not be able to get to the point of forgiving someone. That may take time, and I may have to do any work, but I can do all the good I can in every way I can with everyone I can. And that sometimes you have to act your way into being to do that good and live for that good, and so for people of Buffalo to say, "We've got to change our community." For people of Buffalo to say, "We have got to change the way social media has control over folk," because

the young man who did those killings was involved in white supremacist stuff that he learned online. He didn't learn it from his mom and his daddy. He learned it online. Now we've got to find a way to maintain freedom of speech and yet harness in negative and hurtful speech that actually hurts folk and can result in this.

How do we find ways to have safe use of guns and yet at the same time honor the Second Amendment? As I said in Buffalo, how do we get over ourselves and look at us and figure out what do we need to do so that we're safe in our schools, we're safe in malls, we're safe on subways, we're safe in churches and synagogues and mosques, we're safe at ball games. What must we do together? And that means stop paying the political partisan games. What must we do to make this society safe for all of us? And that may help someone move to the point of living love and eventually, even if I have trouble forgiving that individual, doing what I can that is the work of forgiveness and redemption in society. And maybe the day and moment will come when I can forgive that person. But to work out of love and let that do all the work it can in me and through me in society may be the way that leads me to be able to forgive.

DR: I wanted to ask you that, how you deal with this from the point of view of the people you're sending out there.

AM: The most obvious way I think, and there are a number of people in this room who know what I'm talking about, is that when we summon them with the full authority of the dean and associate dean to morning prayer every morning, that at 7:30 in the morning they read the Psalms with us. The Psalms are an interesting thing to read as the basis of daily prayer because they're not necessarily the thing that you would choose if you started from first principles. But the Psalms have a deep wisdom in them which not only includes the recognition of some of the things we've been talking about, the need of God's redemption and of the need for us to act in love. One of the things they actually tell us when we read them through a fog at 7:42 or whatever it is at that time of the morning is that they tell us things about ourselves that we don't really want to know.

And one of the things that I think is fundamentally problematic in this polarization of which our filmmakers begin presenting the problem to us is that we use the

division of the world into these constructs of our imaginings as an excuse for failing to deal with the deep complexity of our own selves because the assumption that the other is evil and that we are good is based upon a fundamental lack of self-knowledge. It's based upon a failure to recognition that all of us are works in progress. That the struggles that each of us faces in the lifelong journey to become the loving people that the vision we've been discussing is tonight actually involves a certain measure of recognition about who we are and who we are not to begin with. That what we have left undone as well as what we have done. And that the Psalms are a kind of way of reckoning with that day in, day out.

And to understand that the division between humanity isn't between the people who are good in this room and the people who haven't come tonight because they're bad. The most fundamental distinction within humanity is the difference between the selves that we have been or that we sometimes are and the souls that God is calling us to be and the souls that God promises to make us by grace and with the power of the spirit. To understand that is to be what one of our heroes of our Yale history and some of you knew him, Henry Nouwen spoke of as being a wounded healer. That the only way in which someone can actually minister effectively in the congregations of the church or in any other context of ministry is to understand that they themselves are the people who need to hear that message of love as much as they are people who need to tell it to others. And it strikes me that that lack of self-knowledge is perhaps one of the most fundamental diagnostic things which is lacking in the political fabric of our current reality as much as it is within our own selves and as much as it is within our spiritual journeys. The possibility of love becomes different when we understand that it is not simply something to inflict upon others with all this great moral vigor but something into which we need to grow ourselves.

DR: I want to go back to this idea of inside the church versus outside the church. So this movie is about people doing what needs to be done and bit by bit, the lovely lady in Tennessee with the mission to the prostitutes, what an extraordinary thing she's doing. So I think those are the stories that eventually might lead a person inside the four walls of a church. How do you train the clergy to go out and do that?

AM: The purpose of coming and the purpose of leaving week by week, not definitively, are actually deeply bound up together. And it's easier for this in the seminary to say the only reason to come is so that we can send you out in three years to be there for other people. But there's an analogy or at least a parallel process for the church. If the church is simply a place where people come for refuge to find the love that they cannot find anywhere else, the church is only fulfilling half of its potential. Because unless people encounter the God of Jesus Christ at the sacrament of the altar, and they find that they're drawn into becoming that body of Christ, which has an existence outside the doors of the church as well, then of course the whole reason to do this is lost. So, you know, Deborah, the only reason we're gonna be able to give people to come to church in the future has something to do with not just what they'll find when they come in, but who they'll be when they leave. And that's true of a seminary, it's true of the parish as well.

MC: And it may be that picking up on it, I'm a graduate of a seminary, but I don't teach in one, but I have a feeling that one of the struggles for us may be to remember that part of our job is to help to form worshipping, serving communities around Jesus Christ beyond the doors of the church. In other words, part of what we're called to do is actually, and this is tough, how do we train Christian leaders ordained and lay who see their primary job, not just to pastor the flock who's there, but to actually find the flock out there and to be a pastoral Christian presence there and help community to form there that may never come through the doors of the church. That's a church, you see what I mean, that's actually living an unselfish way of being church. Not for who we can get to join us, but who we can get to join the movement that God, that Jesus has in the world.

I used to tease, I used to, well, I'm no parish priest, and I used to, the vestry would always love to have new members, but I said, you all look at a new member of the church and you just see a dollar sign every time, just a dollar sign over one, and they know that. And when folk think, oh, we're worried about this, oh, our numbers are declining, and we just need more people to fill up the pews, if they think that's what the game is about, that's not about love. That's about maintaining an institution, and I love this institution, my pension is tied up here, don't misunderstand me, I love it, but that's not about Jesus and whoever would save his life will lose it, whoever would lose his life.

In other words, give it away, for my sake in the gospel will find it, for what does it profit? A church, a person to gain the whole world and lose their soul. We must not lose our soul, and we will find it by following the way of Jesus, who was in the temple, he got in trouble there, he was in the synagogue, got in trouble there too. In fact, you look at Luke 4, he gave a really good sermon until he actually applied what the sermon meant to the folk who were there, and they said, you need to get out of town now. So Jesus was a creature of the synagogue, of the temple, and yet most of his teaching, the sermon on the mountain wasn't inside the doors of the temple, it was out where the people are. Most of what Jesus does is out where they are. That's what we have to do with seminarians, help them pastor and care for the flock that's already there. And don't ignore them, we want them, because they're the foot soldiers that can go out, more than even clergy, but then go out where the congregation is that we haven't met before.

As Bonhoeffer said, that's a church that will find its life by losing its life and giving it away, and that's what love looks like. God so loved the world today. (audience applauding)

DR: So here we are, what do we get up and do tomorrow? Each and every one of us all sitting here, how do we start our day, how do we pick ourselves up after the first person we get seethingly angry at, because they don't agree with us, what do we do? How do we do it ourselves?

MC: Let me borrow from the Dean, he said something earlier about morning prayer and the prayers in the morning, beginning of the, that there's something there.

Dr. King in 1963 in the Birmingham campaign provided those who marched with, I mean, they used to jokingly call it Dr. King's 10 commandments, but they were sort of 10 principles that were used to train non-violent protesters in the way of non-violence. And knowing that the way of non-violence was the way of actually living love in a conflicted situation, knowing that that was counterintuitive, counter to our natural instinct – You hit me, I'm gonna wanna hit you back, unless you're bigger than I am, then I'm gonna run. But we just have natural ways of responding,

so they knew that there's something unnatural, and yet something deeply natural, but you gotta go deeper to get there. And so Dr. King had these 10 principles, and they had things like the goal of non-violence is not victory, the goal of non-violence is to redress injustices, but the ultimate goal is human reconciliation. The non-violent person speaks with love because the heart of this movement is love, love that's not only in word, but also in deed. And it had 10 principles, but the first one, the first principle in this list of principles for a non-violent person, this was in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963, before you march, read and meditate on the life and teachings of Jesus. That's what you're getting at, go start the day. Because the truth is, we can't do this by ourselves.

I don't have what it takes to love unconditionally constantly because my unenlightened self gets in the way, not my true self, but it does, but with God I can. Archbishop Tutu – Walter would know this, Archbishop Tutu used to say – he probably got this from St. Augustine, I have a feeling, but Tutu said it. He said of God's work in the world by himself, God won't. By ourselves, we can't, but together with God, we can. Together with God, Michael can love in spite of himself. Together with God, you and all of us can be instruments of God's peace and God's love in the world. And that may be the key to start the day. As my grandma used to say, and my grandma was dying to a rock-red Baptist. Grandma used to like this, “I have a little talk with Jesus. Tell him all about your sorrows. Just have a little talk with Jesus. And then let Jesus work through you the rest of the day.”

DR: Before the social media, before you start the thing in the morning. So, Berkeley, how do you see the church in the future? Where are we going here?

AM: Triumph and disaster simultaneously. And I don't mean that purely for rhetorical effect. There are many things that we know and love about the church that won't be the case anymore in 20 years or 50 years. And there are many things about the church and other things we don't know yet that will be lively, creative, life-giving, sustaining, and transformative in people's lives.

We're at a kind of moment in time where we don't quite know which things are fading away and which things are coming into being. What we must be open to is

the fact that they are changing at a rate that we're not used to. But I think people in this room know both those things if you think about it. I bet each of you can think of a context in which you know that doors are being closed and blinds are being drawn. And people are looking at ways of trying to sort of draw things to a dignified close.

But I bet you also know of a place where people are finding the work of the Spirit in fresh ways, where people are seeing growth, where people are seeing a new authenticity and a new set of possibilities. And I certainly think that there will be people who come through this and any seminary who will be involved in both those sets of processes. But I'll say without any equivocation that we wanna be in the business of working with those who will be the innovators and leaders of a church which is not simply interested in working out how not to pull the blind down so quickly. But how we can think about actually taking the gospel out in new and fresh ways, as well as in some very traditional ways.

So I think that the thing that we are most likely to be fooled by is by putting those two things together and imagining that the sort of the average of a church that's just sort of declining slowly and not dramatically is somehow the reality. In fact, the church is declining quite dramatically. And the church is also growing, and the church is doing things that we haven't thought of yet. And the Spirit of Jesus is capable of leading us through that disconcerting reality into a future in which the gospel will still be the gospel and in which a world will still need to hear it. And that's why we're there to do that work and to bring people who will lead that process.

DR: Bishop Curry, final word?

MC: Final word, the Episcopal Church is not dying. It's not dying. It's Not dying. But, but it's being reinvented. And part of that reinvention, part of that is a recreation. Some things will pass away, and some things will emerge anew.

Thistle Farms, Becca Stevens, is an Episcopal priest. That's who she is. Women's lives have been changed because of that. Something new has been born and is being born. And there are things, I get the one thing I get to do is not only do I

support Delta Airlines, and I hope I'll get a job after retirement for all that I've given, the Episcopal Church has contributed to Delta Airlines, but I get to see this church. And what the Dean was describing is true. Some things are passing away, and new things are being born. It's happening at the same time. And that's why I say the church is not dying. That's a monolithic way of thinking. It's being reinvented. But I told the bishops, Matt, Ruth, I told the bishops at our last meeting, I'm sure they've forgotten it since then. But when Good Friday and Easter happened sequentially for Jesus, Friday, death, Sunday, resurrection, new life. That was true in the Bible. By the way, I do believe he rose from the dead. Otherwise I wouldn't be doing this. I mean, you know, that's real.

But the experience of that for us very often is not sequential, but existential. It is, I've worked on that line, sequential, existential. But it's not, it literally happens at the same time. And part of what we are experiencing in the church today is Good Friday and Easter all at the same time. Passing away, rising up, death, resurrection, that's life. The Episcopal church is not dying, but it is being reinvented. And the spirit is at work and is messing with us. And Lord have mercy. They will know we are Christians by our love.

DR: Thank you. (audience applauding)

B: Thank you for listening to The Leader's Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at berkeleydivinityat Yale.edu/podcast.

H: Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow Berkeley at Yale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more.

B: Until next time.

H: The Lord be with you.