

The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The Way of Love*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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On the morning of September 28, 1785, some 40 lay leaders and priests from eight states met at Christ Church in Philadelphia. They were feeling a bit lost – like sheep without a shepherd. The Revolutionary War had just ended two years before. The American church's ties to its mother church, the Church of England, had been severed. And there was only one bishop for all of North America – and he had only been consecrated the previous year in Scotland.

That small gathering in Philadelphia some 233 years ago turned out to be the start of something big – it was the very first General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Among other things, the meeting adopted a constitution for our denomination. It also appointed a committee to draft a revised Book of Common Prayer, since the prayers for the King of England had to be removed from the 1662 prayer book.

Nearly two and a half centuries later, the Episcopal Church still honors this tradition by meeting every three years, and by conducting the business of the denomination in a surprisingly open and democratic fashion. One difference, however, is that the original 40 representatives from eight states have grown to over 1,000 deputies and bishops from 110 dioceses. It's estimated that some 10,000 people attend General Convention. Think of the United States Congress combined with a huge family reunion, and a trade show on top of that, and you'll have a pretty good idea of what it's like to be there!

As many of you know, I spent almost two weeks earlier this month at the 79th General Convention in Austin, Texas. I was there because of my work with the Church Pension Group, a national agency of our denomination. But I thought a lot about the Little Church while I was there because I realized that the acts of General Convention can actually have an impact on our beloved parish here in midtown Manhattan.

For example, some decisions can impact the church's liturgy and thus how we worship and pray. Other decisions can impact who is allowed to get married within our walls. Still other decisions impact who can serve as our lay and ordained leaders. In many ways, the General Convention serves as a shepherd for our denomination. Like a shepherd who leads a flock of sheep, the General Convention exercises leadership and sets the direction of the Episcopal Church for the following three years.

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In today's gospel reading, we hear about the importance of leadership and structure for the church. Jesus and the apostles are tired, and they are trying to get to a deserted place for some rest. As they travel to that place, however, they come across a crowd of people. The people were, as Mark puts it, "sheep without a shepherd." Instead of ignoring them and moving on, Jesus had great compassion for them.

As a result, Jesus ministers to the crowd by teaching and healing them – even though he and his apostles were tired and trying to get some rest. For me, the point of today's gospel reading is that good leadership and good structure is an important ministry in of itself. Good leadership and structure matters a lot in the context of the church. And good shepherds matter as well. While I was in Austin, I saw first-hand how seriously our General Convention takes these values.

For me, one of the most moving actions of this General Convention was the decision to bring the Episcopal Church in Cuba back into the fold of our church. The Cuban church was founded in 1901 by our denomination. In 1966, following the Cuban revolution, the House of Bishops unilaterally granted the Diocese of Cuba its "independence" – even though the diocese never asked for it.

For over fifty years, the Episcopal Church in Cuba has survived largely on its own as an underground church, despite dealing with widespread governmental persecution and the fact that its priests generally earn less than \$50 a month. For over half a century, the members of that church were like sheep without a shepherd. Due to recent political changes, however, the Cuban church asked the Episcopal Church if it could come back home.

While I was in Austin, I had a chance to meet the wonderful bishop of Cuba, Bishop Griselda Delgado del Carpio, as well as other Cuban clergy, including the dean of the cathedral in Havana. I was deeply moved when both the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies voted unanimously to readmit Cuba to the Episcopal Church and to right a wrong that had been committed over fifty years ago. Leadership and structure matter. And shepherds matter as well.

A lot of exciting things happened at General Convention, and I encourage you to go to the Episcopal Church's website to learn more about them. One of the most exciting things that happened was the rollout of a new program from our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. The program is called "The Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life." There's a red and blue insert in your bulletin that describes this program. I invite you to take out the insert and look at it.

As you will see, the Way of Love is a seven-point program that can help us to better follow our Great Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Christ. It's one thing to say that we're members of the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement. But it's another thing to actually live it.

If you look at the insert, you will see that there are seven points about living the Way of Love. Starting at 10:00 on the red circle, and proceeding clockwise, they are: Turn; Learn; Pray; Worship; Bless; Go; and Rest. Let's say the seven points together. One more time!

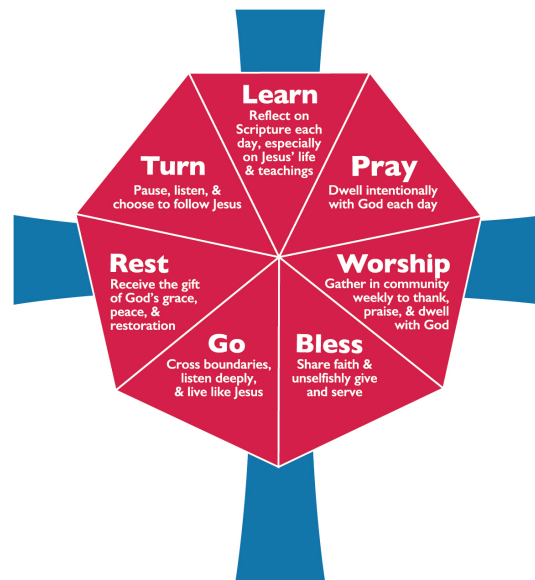
First, we begin by *turning* towards Jesus. Next, we commit to *learning* about Jesus' life and teachings by reflecting on Scripture each day. We then spend time with God by *praying* daily, and by *worshipping* in community each week. This leads to our *blessing* the world with our gifts, and by *going* out into the world, including places of need. Finally, we are called to *rest*. And then the cycle begins again. Do you see how that works?

The wonderful thing about the Way of Love is that it provides a structure for our spiritual lives. It's a rule of life that each of us can follow. Like a shepherd, the Way of Love gives us direction and guidance on how we can follow Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, each and every day of our lives.

Which of these seven points speak the most to you? Which ones are you already practicing? (Well, since you are all here this morning, clearly worship is not a problem.) And which of these seven points are more challenging for you? I invite you to take the insert home with you, to reflect and pray about it, and to see how God might be calling you to engage in the Way of Love.

I don't know if the 40 or so delegates to the very first General Convention in 1785 ever dreamed about what the Episcopal Church would look like 233 years into the future. I do know, however, that they recognized the importance of leadership and structure, and of following Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep.

May we continue to follow in our church ancestors' footsteps – and, most importantly, in Jesus' footsteps – so that our beloved Episcopal Church, and the Little Church, will thrive for generations to come.



THE WAY OF LOVE
Practices for Jesus-Centered Life