

Lent 2024

A Five- Week Lenten Study Guide

Episcopal
Diocese of
Los Angeles

Engagement
Across
Difference
Ministry



A CASE FOR LOVE | LENT 2024

There is no better antidote to the anxiety, polarization and division that dominates our civic discourse than coming together to share the inspiring witness of those making a case for love in the face of hate ... a case for peace in a time of war ... a case for hope in the wake of despair. And there is no better time to come together for that important work than during the season of Lent.

This Lenten Study guide has been inspired by "A Case for Love" -- the documentary film feature using first-person stories to make the case that unselfish love can indeed change the narrative of conflict and demonization infecting our nation by building bridges across the differences that challenge us rather than walls that further divide us. Here is how the film's director Brian Ide describes the project:

Bishop Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, inspired the film's focus as he offered a solution to what ails us: "Love." Specifically, "Unselfish Love."

As Bishop Curry wrote in his latest book, *"When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay our swords and shields down by the riverside to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty of room for all of God's children. When love is the way, we actually treat each other like we are actually family."*

Could the answer to society's problems really be that simple and actually within the grasp of each of us? ... Viewers must decide for themselves, and if their answer is "yes," they will hopefully be inspired to live—intentionally—more selflessly and become part of the solution, making their own case for love.

[View a film trailer here.](#) | A study guide and journal template **[is available here.](#)**

While this curriculum is inspired by the film, viewing it is not a prerequisite for participating. Each of the five sessions in this Lenten series includes a reflection connecting one of the themes of the stories in the film to prayers and lessons from the Lenten lectionary – with reflection questions to explore in either small groups or plenary sessions – encouraging sharing stories making a case for love.

We hope this curriculum will serve as a road map for a forty-day Lenten journey of listening to each other as we listen together to the one who created us in love and called us to love one another. May God bless you in your journey and give us all the grace to become the change we want to see in our beautiful and broken world.

LENT ONE

Opening Prayer and Lesson:

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Reflection: *Giving Up Giving Up*

As it does every year, the Lenten journey begins once again with prayers and readings focused on temptation and repentance. We ask God to "help us who are assaulted by many temptations" and we hear again the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness ... along with the call to "believe in the good news."

One working definition of that good news is simply that **God loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another.** And one temptation we are assaulted by is the temptation to give up on love as an answer to the polarization, division and hatred the permeates our local, national and global discourse.

"A Case for Love" -- the documentary film which inspired the creation of this Lenten study series -- begins by asking a diverse number of people the question "Is love dead?" And it is clear from the responses that for many the jury is still out -- that the temptation to give up on love is very real. And so, for this first session of our five weeks together, we begin with this [reflection by Bishop Steven Charleston](#) -- an Episcopal bishop and an elder of the Choctaw Nation on giving up giving up for Lent.



*How about giving up giving up this Lent?
We live in an age that seems determined
to make us give up.
The economic crisis we face is complex and unrelenting.
The tides of terror haunt us in every corner of the globe.
Our own social and political institutions
seem to be weak and getting weaker.
Our environment is crumbling,
but no one can agree on why or what to do.
Our leaders seem trapped in a revolving door of blame.
Is it any wonder we are tempted to give up?
But this Lent, I suggest we give up giving up.
Instead, let us stand tall as people of faith
and proclaim that we are neither victims nor losers,
but free people with the wisdom and the will
to face any challenge that history sends our way.
I invite people of all denominations to walk together
over these Lenten days and make a common witness
to our faith in the future.
I ask us to have courage and confidence,
to believe in ourselves and never give up —
not because we are unafraid or unaware of what we face —
but because we believe in the One who never gave up on us.*

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does the phrase "Giving up giving up" mean to you personally? How does it resonate with your own experiences or mindset?
- 2) Have you ever experienced the positive effects of not giving up on someone or something? How did this affect your relationship or the outcome?

Closing Prayer: Bless us, O God, in this holy season, in which our hearts seek your help and healing; that we may more and more understand how we are called to live out your dream of a world restored through the indestructible power of your inexhaustible love. Amen.

LENT TWO

Opening Prayer and Lesson:

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Romans 4:13-18

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be."

Reflection: *Telling Stories*

We are a people of stories. The biblical stories we hear again and again – year after year – as we go through the lectionary cycle are foundational to our faith and identity as Christians. The stories we tell and retell to each other about our congregations, our communities and our families help us understand not only who we are but equip us to add our own stories to the narrative quilt of shared history and experience.

This second week in Lent, one of the biblical stories appointed for us is Father Abraham – who "hoped against hope" that he would become the father of many nations he believed God had called him to be. "A Case for Love" offers contemporary stories of those who have hoped-against-hope in a variety of contexts: the sex-trafficked woman who hoped for a better life and found it through the unselfish love of her Thistle Farms sisters; the gay man who hoped for acceptance and inclusion and – having found it in Christian community – is paying it forward by welcoming others; the refugee mother and children hoping-against-hope to build a new life in America find love and support from the family who become part of their journey.

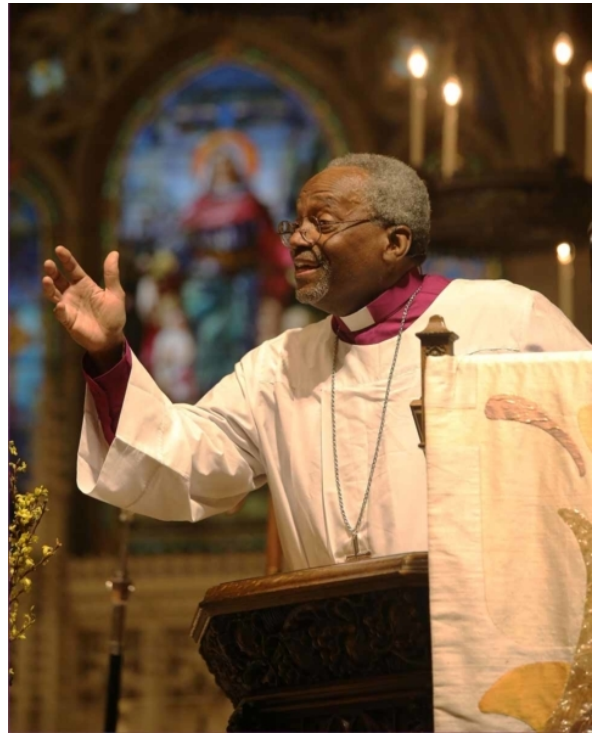
Here's what Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has to say about hope in a [2020 Religion News Service interview](#):

You can't just jump to hope. There's a process you have to go through. There are no shortcuts to it. I know human progress and growth is possible and can happen, but it only happens as a result of hard work, of struggle over the long haul, and that hard work and struggle includes setback. I mean, I'm an African American man. I'm a product of the Black community. I'm a product of — go far enough back, you're into Jim Crow; far enough back, you're in slavery; far enough back, you're in the Middle Passage crossing from West Africa over here. I'm a product of that tradition that has learned there is progress and there are steps forward and then there's a pushback. There always is, but you keep moving forward. You don't go back.

I have seen progress happen in my lifetime. I have seen the pushback, but I've seen we're always moving forward. There's a spiritual of the old slaves. I think they were talking about this when they said, "Keep a-inchin' along like the inchworm."

That's how progress happens. It doesn't happen in quantum. It happens inch by inch, pushback, inch by inch, pushback, inch by inch, pushback, inch by inch, pushback, and before you know it, you've moved farther down the road than you ever thought you would.

I believe it is possible for us to be instruments of healing in this culture. And I refuse to give up. As long as there's a God and God doesn't quit, I'm not quitting.



Reflection/Discussion Questions:

- 1) How does storytelling connect us emotionally and foster empathy? Can you think of a story that deeply resonated with you and made you feel connected to the characters or their experiences?
- 2) As beloved community, how can we encourage and support each other in sharing our own stories? What are some barriers or fears that hold us back from sharing our experiences? How can we create safe spaces for storytelling?

Closing Prayer: Bless us, O God, in this holy season, in which our hearts seek your help and healing; that we may more and more understand how we are called to live out your dream of a world restored through the indestructible power of your inexhaustible love. Amen.

LENT THREE

Opening Prayer and Lesson:

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Reflection: *The Great Commandment and the Golden Rule*

Making a case for love has always been an uphill battle. In a world that seems "wired" for judgment, competition, and domination the Gospel values of love, justice and compassion can be dismissed as foolish weakness. "A Case for Love" includes stories of those who have reached out in love for neighbor across boundaries of difference – and in the face of bias, prejudice and hatred.

The resourced couple choosing to live in an under-served neighborhood in order to leverage their privilege to foster compassion across economic divides. The woman who turns her love of cooking into a ministry of hospitality creating a community of caring that feeds both body and soul.

For generations the church has been called to embrace the "foolishness" of a God who loves us beyond our wildest imaginings -- and asks one thing in return: that we love our neighbors as ourselves. The stories of those who have aspired to live their lives in alignment with that love are as current as the recent documentary and as ancient as our biblical texts.

And as we claim that legacy, we can be inspired by [these words from author, historian and public theologian Diana Butler Bass:](#)

I don't remember when I first heard either the Great Commandment or the Golden Rule. Sunday school? A sermon at church? A Bible story read by my mother?

Long before I memorized the books of the New Testament, could recite any creed, or knew any formal theology, I knew the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule.

That this week's lectionary readings led me back to these simple truths — the first things I knew of faith — love God and love neighbor — was a great gift. As I read the words, I breathed easier and felt a soulful spaciousness. "Love God, love neighbor" cleared the clutter, reminding my weary spirit of an ancient wisdom. These words have sounded forth for millennia — through political crises, times of violence, pandemics and suffering, and many a dark winter. And they have guided humankind toward justice, peace, and healing, shining their bright light in the worst of times.

What could be more relevant to our elections, to getting through a pandemic, and for facing our anxieties, than the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule? Sometimes the simplest thing is the most needed thing.

- *When you vote, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.*
- *When you don your mask, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.*
- *When you listen to the news, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.*
- *When you can't catch your breath, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.*
- *Whatever you do, remember: Love God, love your neighbor.*

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do these teachings influence our relationships with others? What are some practical ways we can apply them in our daily interactions and decision-making?
- 2) Can you think of any challenges or obstacles that prevent us from fully embracing and practicing the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule in our interactions with others? How can we overcome these challenges?

Closing Prayer: Bless us, O God, in this holy season, in which our hearts seek your help and healing; that we may more and more understand how we are called to live out your dream of a world restored through the indestructible power of your inexhaustible love. Amen.



LENT FOUR

Opening Prayer and Lesson:

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

John 3:14-17

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Reflection: *God so loved the world*

The Gospel for this fourth week in Lent includes one of the most beloved texts in all of scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ..." In the first week of our time together, we were offered **God loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another** as a working definition the good news Jesus came not just to show us but to teach us. How we live out the love in the world – how we make the case for love – is what a life of Christian discipleship is about. And it is what New Testament scholar and theologian Marcus Borg wrote about in this excerpt from [his 2006 book](#) on Jesus as a Religious Revolutionary:

The author of John's gospel speaks of God's love for the world: "For God so loved the world ... and says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." [In John's gospel] God's character and passion are not separate ... and God's character and passion -- what God is like and God's will for the world -- go hand in hand. And God's passion is justice.

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As the social form of compassion, justice is about politics [the word "politics" comes from the Greek polis for "city"] ...Politics is about the shape and shaping, the structure and structuring, of the city and, by extension, of human communities more generally, ranging from the family to society as a whole ... Justice is the political form of compassion, the social form of love, a compassionate justice grounded in God as compassionate ...

The way of Jesus was both personal and political. It was about personal transformation. And it was political, a path of [nonviolent] resistance to the domination system and advocacy of an alternative vision of life together under God. His counter advocacy, his passion for God's passion, led to his execution ...

What would Jesus do in our context? He might once again disrupt the temple—the unholy alliance between religion and empire. I think he would teach the wrongness and futility of violence in human affairs. He would be passionate about compassion and justice as the primary virtues of a life centered in the God whom he knew. And of course, he would teach the importance of a deep centering in God.

And – we might add – the importance of making a case for love.

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

- 1) How and where do you see that love being lived out in the world?
- 2) Where are the places where love and justice connect in your story?

Closing Prayer: Bless us, O God, in this holy season, in which our hearts seek your help and healing; that we may more and more understand how we are called to live out your dream of a world restored through the indestructible power of your inexhaustible love. Amen.

LENT FIVE

Opening Prayer and Lesson:

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

John 12:20-26

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.

Reflection: *We Wish to See Jesus*

In the prayer appointed for this fifth and final week in Lent we ask for "grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found." Throughout this Lenten series we have shared and reflected on stories about where those true joys are to be found -- centered in living out the unselfish love which is the antidote to the anxiety, polarization, and division that dominates our civic discourse.

Some of those stories are told in the "Case for Love" film ... stories of individuals and families who overcame exclusion narratives to create new stories of love and inclusion: the veteran isolated by PTSD, the formerly incarcerated man turned restorative justice professional, the siblings adopted together making a new family together. Some of those stories are our own stories. And some of those stories are biblical stories -- like the one in the Gospel appointed for this week explored in this reflection by Susan Russell from a 2012 sermon ["But What About the Greeks?"](#)



Every time I hear this passage, I'm left wondering what happened to these Greeks who showed up at the beginning of the gospel saying "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" -- setting off the from-Philip-to-Andrew-to-Jesus chain of events that ended up with Jesus going into the poetic and prophetic musing on what it means to be glorified and "indicating the kind of death he was to die."

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We never find out what happened to those Greeks.

A brief historical context note: When John says "some Greeks", he doesn't mean folks who hang out in Athens and are related to Zorba. To the 1st century hearers of the Gospel "Greeks" meant "non-Jews" - foreigners - Gentiles. No wonder Philip had to go check with Andrew first. As one of the commentaries I consulted noted: "... evidently being dubious how they might be received." There was no automatic welcome for these guys: these Greeks who wanted to see Jesus.

So we're all left wondering: Did they get to see Jesus? Were they in crowd when Jesus offered this long explanation of what his death was going to be about? And if they were did they "get it" ... or did they leave wondering what the deal was ... feeling as if they came in late in the second act and were not sure what the plot line was all about?

And ... I find myself wondering ... do we do that today? Do we have folks who come to us saying "We wish to see Jesus!" ... and do they get to? Or do they get an explanation of a doctrine that's out of context and end up wandering off wondering what it was all about.

This Jesus stuff. This Christian thing. This Good News.

In this fifth week of Lent, I pray that God will give us grace to "be the change we wish to see in the world" – to persevere in the proclamation of God's Good News to all people – God's love available to absolutely everybody. In spite of the setbacks and the obstacles -- of the challenges and the costs -- as we journey with Jesus we claim his "agenda" as our own: to proclaim Good News to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight to the blind and liberation to the captives.

And the "how" we do that is making the case for love so that whoever you are and wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, you know that if you come here to this place seeking Jesus you don't have to ask if you can see him—you will know that He is already here waiting for you with open arms.

Reflection/Discussion Questions:

- 1) What does the phrase "be the change we wish to see in the world" mean to you personally? How do you interpret it and how does it inspire you to take action?
- 2) In what ways can we actively become agents of change in our immediate circles, communities, or society? What specific actions or behaviors can we adopt to make a positive impact?

Closing Prayer: Bless us, O God, in this holy season, in which our hearts seek your help and healing; that we may more and more understand how we are called to live out your dream of a world restored through the indestructible power of your inexhaustible love. Amen.