Good morning Good Shepherd beloved of the Lord!

I trust each of you are remaining safe. In each of our self-isolations, none of us are alone. In the community of the Spirit, we all remain connected! With all that is going on around us, and in the media, that consumes our thoughts, hearts and emotions, it is important to remember that there is a world beyond Covid 19! Life still goes on, growth in our lives continues. With those thoughts in mind, I would like in this letter to get back to a discussion I began a couple weeks ago – about the “Way of Love.” As I had mentioned previously, the Way of Love may be understood as a path that we travel on, or a set of eyes through which we see things – a path that draws us into the heart of Jesus, and into the heart of our world. The Episcopal Church has identified seven practices that, if consistently engaged in, will lead us deeper in our understanding and love of God, ourselves, and our world. Over time, as we allow these practices to become habits, we may notice ourselves becoming more loving, compassionate, forgiving, gracious, and patient than we ever have been before.

Although your increased understanding of these seven practices may begin with these series of weekly letters, there will always be more to learn! In the months ahead as a parish, these practices will morph into various iterations of themselves. They may influence our Bible Studies and Fellowship Flocks. They may impact the way we understand and plan our annual church events. They may influence how we engage in our regular meetings. They may transform the direction of our conversations as we gather regularly in small groups here and there: the office crew as they gather to handle the parish finances; the various guilds, Creative Design, Memorial Garden, and other teams as they gather to regularly do their work. The Way of Love will become “our” Way of Love as a parish.

Well, let me begin with the first practice in The Way of Love: TURN

To TURN is to change direction. I may be going one way, and something causes me to shift direction. Maybe I know that I need to take a right on the next road up ahead in order to get home. I put on my TURN signal to indicate which direction I will be turning. In life, we TURN for many reasons: in order to get to our destination, to avoid a danger or roadblock up ahead, or we gather new information and change the direction of our thoughts and how we understand things. Turning may be a positive choice, or it may be a less constructive and a negative choice. We may TURN our thoughts towards the corona virus and allow fear to get ahold of us. We may pause in a contemplative moment and TURN our thoughts and hearts towards our children and grandchildren. We may TURN our thoughts and hearts towards Christ.

Turning is a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual act:

* **Turning is a physical act**: we turn a page, turn a corner, turn around, turn off that TV program.
* **Turning is an emotional and mental act**: we turn our hard hearts back in a loving gesture toward our spouse, we turn from anger, and turn from dark depression.
* **Turning is a spiritual and religious act**: we turn our hearts back towards the Lord *(Rev. 2:4 reads: “you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent”)* weturn and forgive others, we turn back to a community of faith we had left, we turn towards a new spiritual path.

We read these words in scripture: “turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” Deut. 30:10. And, these words: “Turn back to the Lord and forsake your sins.” Sirach 17:25.

In order to engage in the spiritual practice of Turning, we need to first **be open to TURN, to be willing to make a shift of direction**. And sometimes that is very hard! Maybe we have become so calloused and bitter to that person that we will NEVER change and see things differently. Or, we are so afraid of what may happen if we change our established beliefs and how we see the world; how we may understand – God/the church/doctrine/humanity – that we stay locked in our current paradigm or worldview. There is only One who is strong enough to bring us to the point of being open to change, and that is the glorious Spirit of God.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke these words: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you” Ezekiel 36:26-27. We all have times in this life when we walk around with hearts of stone. Years back in my former denomination, I pastored a small congregation. There was a key leader in that church that, over the course of several years, deeply wounded me, my wife, and our children by his words and his actions. I still bear the scars from those years. But I have chosen to let God give me a “heart of flesh” towards this man. We all encounter situations in life where we become hard and calloused. And when we find ourselves in that condition, we are unable in our own strength to TURN. We need to allow the Holy Spirit of God to soften our stony hearts.

Ultimately, as disciples of Christ, we must be willing to change. And, I would submit to you, that based on the words of scripture, my own life experience, and the experience of many others, without a number of “heart softening’s,” and course corrections throughout the years of our lives, we will never grow as fully into the image and likeness of Christ as we could have.

So, how do we practice the discipline of the TURN? Turning is something we choose to do many times through the course of each day. Here are just a few examples. Some are easier than others:

* When we wake up in the morning, we may say “Thank you God for this new day!” In that simple act, we TURN to Jesus.
* We may read a daily devotional, read scriptures, read Morning Prayer, or engage in Centering Prayer. In those actions, we TURN to Christ.
* Later that same morning we may receive a call from a fellow parishioner. We find the call irritating us. In that moment of awareness, we choose to TURN away from irritation to Christ.
* Later that day we are gathering with a few friends (at a safe social distance 😊). We notice the conversation turning negative and somewhat critical. We pause in that moment and TURN our thoughts and emotions and heart back to Christ. Christ may use our act of internal turning to whisper to us in our thoughts: “Speak up. Redirect the conversation to something positive.”
* We TURN when we take a walk and find ourselves awed by the shape of a tree, or the flight of a bird.

The practice of turning would be impossible, if it were not for several of the other practices we will be engaging in. Without the practices of LEARN, PRAY, WORSHIP, BLESS, GO, & REST, we would not be open to the Spirit of God redirecting and turning us.

Be open to a change of direction. Be open to growth. Be open to TURN