



The Rev. Michael Bruce Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, speaks during the wedding ceremony of Britain's Prince Harry and U.S.-native Meghan Markle on May 19 in Windsor Castle. His message about love drew attention from around the world. Owen Humphreys, AFP/Getty Images

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

African-American bishop took royal wedding to church

Sermon emphasized world-changing power of love

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I wasn't going to do it, but the topic keeps coming up. Yes, we were in England during the royal wedding that took place nearly three weeks ago.

People still talk about it. While there are some here who want nothing to do with anything royal, more were impressed with the couple, the ceremony, the pageantry and particularly with the "sermon." The British papers put it on the front page, and the Sunday Times the next day had it as the headline.

Comments here in England included:

- ▶ "Prince Harry was great and Meghan Markle was amazing but, seriously, there's only one person anyone's talking about after the royal wedding today."
- ▶ "An African-American bishop quotes a French Jesuit priest at a British royal wedding. Who says the world can't change."
- ▶ "Thanks for taking us to church."

It seems to have made an impact in the States as well, based on what I've been reading. Footage and transcripts have been posted on websites and covered by National Public Radio, the "Today" show, CNN, Esquire, Essence and even Good Housekeeping and Town and Country.

The worldwide coverage is reported to be 30 million, not counting those who have watched in the days following the event. (You can watch the sermon video at: bit.ly/bishopcurrysermon.)

So what does this have to do with interfaith? This brings me back to the sermon by the African-American Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Rev. Michael Curry. It was clearly from a very Christian perspective, but nearly everything he said could be affirmed in any faith tradition or even from a secular stance.

The theme, appropriate for a wedding, was about love and began with

a quote from the Song of Solomon:

"Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;

"For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.

"Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

But this was no sentimental or romantic version of love — it was love as power, the power to change the world. It begins with the source. "We were made by a power of love, and our lives were meant ... to be lived in that love. ...Ultimately, the source of love is God himself: the source of all our lives."

Then Bishop Curry quoted the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way."

This hope for a new world led the slaves in America to sing a spiritual that "explained the dynamic power of love and why it has the power to transform." That song speaks of a "balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole." Curry called for a love that is not selfish or self-centered. "Love can be sacrificial, and in so doing, becomes redemptive. And that way of unselfish, sacrificial redemptive love changes lives, and it can change this world."

Curry called us all to imagine a world changed by love where no child goes to bed hungry, where poverty will become history,

the earth will be a sanctuary, where "we lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more." When love is the way, "we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook."

"When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all, and we are brothers and sisters, children of God," Curry continued. "My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family."

But Curry wasn't finished; he went on to quote the French Jesuit priest and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who said that the harnessing of fire was one of the greatest scientific and technological discoveries in all of human history. Fire made it possible to cook food, sanitize in ways to prevent disease and heat buildings, so making migrations possible to colder climates. Harnessed fire allows us to travel by cars and airplanes, and allows for communication technologies.

The challenge from Curry, de Chardin and the Song of Solomon, was to see love as a raging fire, "that waters cannot quench, neither can floods drown it."

"If humanity ever harnesses the energy of fire again, if humanity ever captures the energy of love — it will be the second time in the history of the world that we have discovered fire," Curry preached.

The essence of Bishop Curry's message, he explained, goes back to Jesus when he was asked by a lawyer to sum up the teaching of Moses. Jesus

reaches back to the Hebrew Scriptures, quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."

In a current Christian Century article, the American Episcopal priest and author Heidi Haverkamp reflects, "Curry brought not only the living word of God but the fullness of his personhood as a black American and a descendant of enslaved people into that chapel, a veritable fortress of historic, institutionalized, church-sanctified white supremacy. He is the first African-American to hold the highest office of the Episcopal Church, a denomination that was the church home of many slaveholders, including half of the 12 American presidents who owned slaves. Curry's identity as a black man brought realism and painful integrity to his message."

Diane Evans, writing in The Guardian, summarized the impact. "It was a sermon that will go down in history as a moment when the enduring seat of colonialism was brought before the Lord, and questioned in its own house. In the mention of slavery was the inherent accusation of white silver-spoon complicity, and that this union should not go forth without acknowledging it."

Or, as Prince Harry, following the sermon, was observed, in full view of the cameras, to have mouthed the word, "Wow!"

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