



Northwestern Ohio Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

2026

**THE WAY
OF LOVE**

1 JOHN 4:19



**Lenten Planning
Guide**

“ —

| **We Love because**

he first loved us. |

— ”

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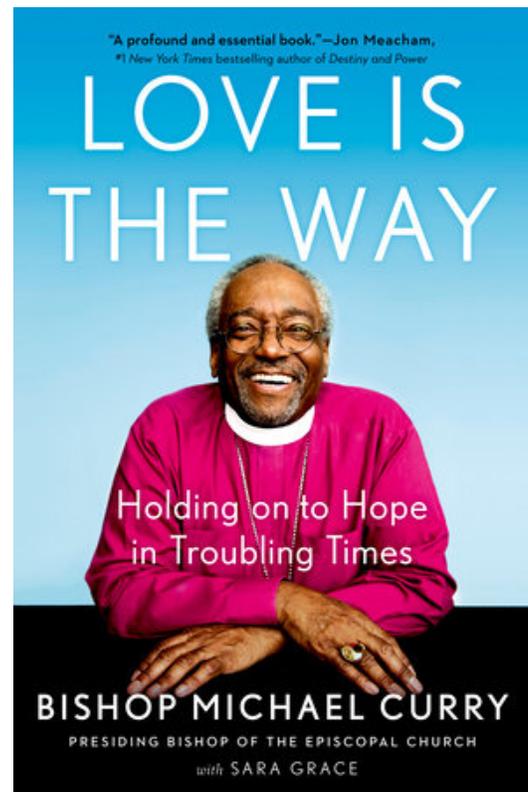
Note on Using This Resource

This Lenten Planning Guide is designed around the Northwestern Ohio Synod's 2026 book of the year; *Love Is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubled Times* by Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry. It is intended to help leaders shape this content into a Lenten series and may be used for midweek worship, dinner church, or small-group gatherings.

This resource is meant to be adapted and contextualized to best serve your setting. The Focus Questions/Themes, Scripture, Story, and Prayer/Blessing are drawn directly from Bishop Curry's book. The accompanying verses from First John were selected by Bishop Daniel Beaudoin to serve as memory verses. In 2026, the Northwestern Ohio Synod is focusing on First John to explore the love of Jesus. The discussion questions and hymns have been created and selected to complement the stories and Gospel readings—please choose those most appropriate for your context.

In this resource we provide snippets of stories that Bishop Curry shares. The full story can be found in the resource notes. You are encouraged to use as much or as little of the material as it is helpful. The Story & Share section may be used to spark a sermon, begin small-group conversation, prompt journaling, or support other forms of reflection. You know what works best in your context.

While this series would be enriched if the congregation reads Bishop Curry's book, it is not required. Consider designing the programming for your parish with a variety of different opportunities to engage the material in ways that might work for folks differing in their capacity to participate.



Ideas for Using This Resource in a Congregation



Scan the QR Code to Access
Video

Helpful Tools for Using This Lenten Planning Guide

NWOS 2026 Lenten Planning Guide Online Resources, <https://nwos-elca.church/wayoflove2026/>

All Creation Sings (ACS): Evangelical Lutheran Worship Supplement, 2020

Dare to Lead: List of Values by Brené Brown,
<https://brenebrown.com/resources/dare-to-lead-list-of-values/>

Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), 2006

Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubled Times by Bishop Michael Curry,
2020

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version – Updated Edition (NRSVue), 2021

Series at a Glance

| Week | Focus Question / Chapters | Scripture |
|---------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Ash Wed | What is this thing called love? <i>(chapters 1-2)</i> | 1 John 4:19 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a |
| Lent 1 | How do we find the strength to keep going? <i>(chapters 3-4)</i> | 1 John 2:17 Romans 12:1-2; 9-21 |
| Lent 2 | I am just an ordinary person – can my love really change things? <i>(chapters 5-6)</i> | 1 John 3:11 1 Corinthians 3:4-11 |
| Lent 3 | I'm told to love my neighbor, but who is my neighbor? <i>(chapters 7-8)</i> | 1 John 4:7 Luke 10:25-37 |
| Lent 4 | How can love overcome what divides us? <i>(chapters 9-10)</i> | 1 John 4:10-11 John 13:1-17 |
| Lent 5 | How do we put love into action? <i>(chapters 11-12)</i> | 1 John 3:18 1 John 4:7-16 |

Ash Wednesday

Focus Question:

What is this thing called love?

Verse from First John:

1 John 4:19

“We love because he first loved us.”

Scripture:

1 Corinthians 13:1-8a

¹ If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends.

Hymns:

- Ubi Caritas (ELW 642) – mentioned in **Love is the Way** (page 37)
- Beautiful Things (ACS 925)
- Change My Heart, O God (ELW 801)
- Come Now, O Prince of Peace (ELW 247)
- What Wondrous Love is This (ELW 666)

Story & Share:

“In my own life, love has had so many, many faces, but among the boldest is the face of Josie Robbins. Josie, who’s eighty-five years old as I write this and still in my life, was one of the people who took care of me and my sister when my mother passed away after a long illness...Moved by love, Josie jumped in with both arms and never let go...Josie Robbins is what love looks like.” (Read the full story in ***Love is the Way*** on pages 12-13)

- Who has been the face of love in your life?
- What have they taught you are the qualities of love?
- Reflecting on your experiences, how would you define love? How is God's love similar to what you've experienced, and how does it go beyond it?

Prayer/Blessing:

“Goodness is stronger than evil.
Love is stronger than hate.
Light is stronger than darkness.
Life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours through Him who loves us. Amen.”

– *An African Prayer Book* by: Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Optional Reading:

Love is the Way: Chapters 1-2

Lent 1

Focus Question

How do we find the strength to keep going?

Scripture from First John:

1 John 2:17

And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God abide forever.

Scripture:

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. ²Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (NRSVue; scripture referenced in **Love is the Way** on page 56)

Hymns:

- God, Be the Love to Search and Keep Me (ACS 1084)
- Welcome Table (ACS 969)
- We Come to the Hungry Feast (ELW 479)
- What Is This Place (ELW 524)

Story & Share:

“Nellie Goldie Royster Strayhorne (Bishop Curry’s Grandmother) was not unlike many others of her time...I watched her as she stood cleaning greens, pounds and pounds of them, getting ready to work one of her culinary miracles...If Grandma’s cooking was ‘making do,’ then we know what ‘making do’ really means. It means taking grits and making them gourmet. It means creating a meal for your family that tastes like love feels. A meal so delicious you forget your troubles, at least while you’re at the table.” (Read the full story in ***Love is the Way*** on pages 52-54).

- What is a simple meal that helps you “forget your troubles”? Who prepares—or once prepared—it for you? What does that meal represent to you?
- What “ingredients” are needed to make something ordinary become extraordinary?
- Where do you see something old being made new in your life today? How does noticing this shape your hope?

Prayer/Blessing:

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”
Gracious God, give us eyes to see. Amen.

– ***Aurora Light*** by: Elizabeth Barrett Browning referenced in ***Love is the Way*** on page 57

Optional Reading:

Love is the Way: Chapters 3-4

Lent 2

Focus Question:

I am just an ordinary person – can my love really change things?

Scripture from First John:

1 John 3:11

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

Scripture:

1 Corinthians 3:4-11

⁴For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not all too human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and each will receive wages according to their own labor. ⁹For we are God’s coworkers, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Let each builder choose with care how to build on it. ¹¹For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. (NRSVue; scripture referenced in ***Love is the Way*** on pages 136-137)

Hymns:

- Take, Oh, Take Me As I Am (ELW 814)
- Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song (ELW 808)
- Will You Come and Follow Me (ELW 798)
- Canticle of the Turning (ELW 723)

Story & Share:

“Every once in a while we can see how this works in practice. I saw it a few years ago when I met Hugh Masekela, the South African trumpeter...When Hugh was a teenager, he saw an American movie based on a famous jazz trumpeter...The next day, he went to the chaplain of his school, who was Trevor Huddleston...He had a reputation among the kids: He would do anything he could for you...He realized handing him an instrument wasn't enough, so he then asked the leader of a local brass band to teach him how to play it. Huddleston didn't know what would become of Hugh and his trumpet. All he knew was that he had seen love glimmering and had to do what he could to add heat to its light.” (Read the full story in ***Love is the Way*** on pages 137-139)

- Who has recognized your gifts and chosen to invest in you? What did they see in you that you may not have seen in yourself?
- What has been the long-term impact of that investment? How did it shape your confidence, your faith, or the way you show up for others?
- What small act of goodness is God inviting you to do now? How will you remain faithful and invested even when you may never see the results?

Prayer/Blessing:

“We may never see the end result, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers not messiahs. We are prophet's of a future not our own.” Amen

– Anonymous (frequently mistakenly attributed to Oscar Romero) referenced in ***Love is the Way*** on page 122

Optional Reading:

Love is the Way: Chapters 5-6

Lent 3

Focus Question:

I'm told to love my neighbor, but who is my neighbor?

Scripture from First John:

1 John 4:7

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Scripture:

Luke 10:25-37

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (NRSVue; scripture referenced in **Love is the Way** on page 145)

Hymns:

- Spirit, Open My Heart (ACS 1043)
- Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love (ELW 708)
- Will You Let Me Be Your Servant (ELW 659)
- The Church of Christ, in Every Age (ELW 729)
- God of Mercy, God of Light (ELW 714)

Story & Share:

“Eva was a prominent member of the Baltimore community who was a survivor of the Holocaust...She came and told her story. To testify. To bear witness...As she spoke, at first I was hearing her words but not reacting to them. I think I was listening with only my head and not my heart...She then started to tell us about life in the camps, and at one point raised her hand to gesture. And when she raised her hand, her sleeve dropped a bit and I saw it. A number tattooed on her elegant arm...It hit me then as never before: That tattoo was who and what she was to her captors. A number. A thing. An object. An ‘it.’ That number rendered her an ‘it.’ And when a person, a human child of God, my sister, my brother, my sibling, becomes an ‘it’ to society or any of its members, then the unthinkable becomes thinkable and the horrible possible. That’s how someone sits by while evil is done.” (Read the full story in **Love is the Way** on pages 141-143)

Or

“He was one of the dealers staring at us from across the street...He asked me if we could sit down and talk. ‘I want out.’ Those were the exact words he used...One day, he said, ‘Tell me about Jesus.’ I’m embarrassed to say that over the course of several meetings, I had never brought up Jesus. That says something about how frozen and conflicted I was, since...you might have noticed that Jesus is a strong presence in everything I do. Yet I hadn’t offered to pray with this man or for him...When he finally asked to hear about Jesus, I was surprised—despite the fact that he had walked himself into a church week after week to meet with a man wearing a collar. But all I could see at first was a drug dealer, and what’s a drug dealer got to do with Jesus?” (Read the full story in **Love is the Way** on pages 155-160)

- Have you ever encountered someone who compelled you to listen with your heart and not just your head? Who was that person? How did they shift your perspective? In what ways did that encounter stay with you?

- Who is at risk of being turned into an “it” in our community? In our world? What happens—to them and to us—when people are reduced to labels rather than seen as beloved children of God?
- Bishop Curry writes about the difference between the *I-Thou* and *I-It* mentality that is essential for prioritizing the good of the ‘altruistic we’. In your experiences, what practices can help us resist the temptation to dehumanize God’s children?

Prayer/Blessing:

“I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.”

– Philippians 3:14-15 (King James Version) referenced in **Love is the Way** on page 173

Optional Reading:

Love is the Way: Chapters 7-8

Lent 4

Focus Question:

How can love overcome what divides us?

Scripture from First John:

1 John 4:10-11

¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Scripture:

John 13:1-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already decided that Judas son of Simon Iscariot would betray Jesus. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had reclined again, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater

than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (NRSVue; scripture referenced in **Love is the Way** on pages 196-198)

Hymns:

- Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service (ELW 712)
- Love Consecrates the Humble Act (ELW 360)
- We All Are One in Mission (ELW 576)
- God, We Gather as Your People (ACS 1038)
- Christ Our Peace (ACS 1037)

Story & Share:

“The next day or so, we all participated in a foot-washing ceremony...I invite you to imagine this: Grown men dressed in purple, washing each other’s feet in plastic basins, walking barefoot across the floor of a thousand-year-old crypt, in all its gritty glory...I don’t know what it is about feet, but exposing them and letting another person wash them is disorienting. You’re not in control...This is humans meeting each other’s humanity in a very visceral way...I couldn’t tell you who washed whose feet that day, only that no one refused.

From that point on, we were moving gradually toward resolution.” (Read the full story in **Love is the Way**, pages 197-199)

- Have you ever had an experience that brought you into a deeper sense of unity with the people around you? What helped create that sense of connection? How did it change the way you saw others—or yourself?
- What forces or experiences do you see intensifying division in the world today? Where do you notice these divisions showing up most clearly—in communities, churches, families, or online spaces?
- Bishop Curry says, “Maybe agreeing to love is the greatest agreement. And the only one that ultimately matters, because it makes a future possible.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What does “agreeing to love” look like in practice when we strongly disagree with one another?

Prayer/Blessing:

“Therefore let us be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” Amen

- Ephesians 5:1-2 NRSVue; referenced in **Love is the Way** on page 197

Optional Reading:

Love is the Way: Chapters 9-10

Lent 5

Focus Question:

How do we put love into action?

Scripture from First John:

1 John 3:18

Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

Scripture:

1 John 4:7-16

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. (NRSVue; scripture referenced in **Love is the Way** on pages 232-233)

Hymns:

- Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song (ELW 808)
- We are Called (ELW 720)
- Go To The World (ACS 991)
- Guide My Feet (ACS 987)
- God Is Love (ACS 1041)

Story & Share:

This is where our story joins in the great Jesus movement, abiding in the way of love. “To live into our faith and values, we need to bring intentionality and purpose to every day—and that’s where what’s called a *rule of life* comes in to support us.... This is a way to create tangible habits that support our heart’s intentions. (***Love is the Way***, pages 249-250)

Steps for Creating Your Rule of Life

1. Identify one to three core values or principles that you would like to live more deeply into. Consider your own experience: What values drive the people you most love or admire? What might most contribute to your growth?
2. Use the value(s) you chose to write vows that summarize what the values specifically mean in the context of your life and your reasons for wanting to translate them into changes to your daily life. See the vow that Bishop Curry writes as an example on page 252 in ***Love is the Way***.
3. Now brainstorm some habits that will allow you to practice the values you identified in various areas of your life. Look around and look at the stories of wise ones who came before to see what others have practiced.
4. While using a daily, weekly or monthly calendar to create regular habits works for many, don’t be afraid to create a schedule that fits your personal schedule. (***Love is the Way***, pages 251-253)

“Consider which of the below areas are most important for your life and values.”

Categories of Action (***Love is the Way***, pages 253-255)

- Body: How can you put yourself in the best physical and mental state to live into your rule of life?
- Mind: How might you commit to time for growth, learning and enrichment that supports your rule of life?
- Spirit: How might you commit to a regular schedule of prayer, meditation or rituals that offer freedom from the self, to connect with God?
- Relationships: What practices would allow you to strengthen your most important relationships?
- Giving Back: How might you commit to sharing your resources of time, money and attention with others?
- Community: Where can you find and join like-minded people who could support you over time in practicing your rule of life?

Prayer/Blessing:

“When God, who is love, becomes our spiritual center of gravity, and love our moral compass, we live differently, regardless of what the world around us does. The world changes for the better, one life at a time.

So don't give up on love.
Listen to it.
Trust it.
Give into it.
Obey it.

Love can help and heal when nothing else can. Love can lift up and liberate when nothing else will. May God love you and bless you. And may God hold us all in those almighty hands of love.”

- Bishop Michael Curry referenced in ***Love is the Way*** on page 248.

Optional Reading:

Love is the Way: Chapters 11-12 and Appendix