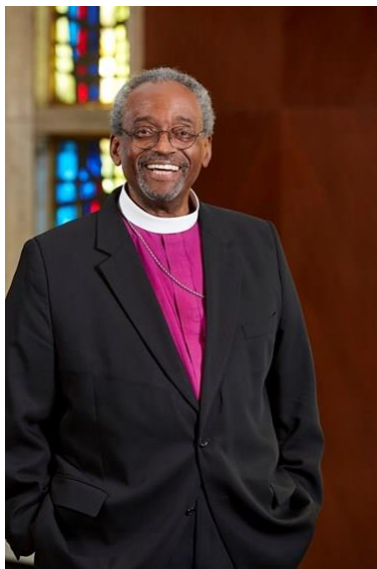


Bishop Michael Curry: Love's soft landing 08 JANUARY 2021

When *Michael Curry's* mother became seriously ill, friends and family stepped in during his childhood

COMMUNITY has been my conduit to the safe harbour of God's love my whole life, but especially since I was ten years old. Until then, my life had been quiet and secure in our little East Buffalo community.

But that summer, everything changed. My family had driven down from Buffalo to visit my maternal grandmother in her apartment in Yonkers, New York. We all spent the day at Playland, an amusement park.



My sister, my cousins, and I had the time of our lives. We came home happy and worn out.

I don't remember much else, until the middle of the night. We kids were bunking in the living room, and noises and flashing lights outside woke me up. I peeked out of my sleeping bag and saw lights on in the dining room. Paramedics came through with their red equipment bags. I wasn't scared exactly, but I was confused. What was going on?

When everyone left, Grandma sat down with us on the couch. Mommy was sick, she said. They had taken her to the hospital to check her out. Daddy was with her.

The next morning our father came home and told us Mommy's brain — her brilliant mathematician's brain — had been bleeding. She had

gone into a coma.

He explained that meant she was sleeping, and we didn't know yet when she'd wake up. We couldn't visit her, he said, because children weren't allowed in the hospital. (That was customary back then.)

The adults did a good job at making it seem like everything would be OK, somehow. So we kids stayed busy with our bikes and board games, letting the grown-ups do the worrying for us. After some days or weeks — in my child's memory, I only know that it seemed like a very long time — Daddy drove us back to Buffalo.

Mommy stayed in the hospital because she wasn't stable enough to be moved. It felt strange and sad to be leaving without her.

AT THAT point began what must have been one of the hardest periods of my father's life. When I look back, I say to myself, "God almighty, how did he do it?" Daddy would lead Sunday services at St Philip's in Buffalo, then take off for the eight-hour drive to New York to be with my mother.

On Thursday, he'd drive the eight hours back and go straight back to work — leading Bible study, praying with folk, keeping the church's many programs running, alongside all the administrative and organizing work that falls to a parish priest.

We were a close-knit family. Now my mother had been taken from us in the middle of the night, and my father was gone half the week to care for her. This period could have made an indelible and traumatic mark on me.

It could have planted in me the feeling — not that I would have been able to articulate it yet — that the world was a cruel and random place. That love was as fragile and fleeting as our human bodies. I could have lost my childhood.

But that's not what happened. My cousin Bill was from Ohio and had recently graduated from Kent State. He was in the market for a teaching job, and instead of staying in Ohio, he decided he would search for it in Buffalo so that he could help us out.

He ended up working for the Buffalo Public Schools until his retirement, which is to say that the fundamental geography of his life was shaped by his willingness to be there when family needed him.

Meanwhile, the community rose up around us. These were people from my father's church, and they all lived in roughly the same neighbourhood of East Buffalo — the Black neighbourhood, formerly the Polish neighbourhood, which all sat east of Main Street.

There were domestic workers and janitors, cooks, and servers. Plenty of people were struggling, or something close to it. But that didn't stop them from extending a hand, or even their wallet, when someone needed it. They were opinionated, politically engaged people, always debating, or fussing about something.

These folks weren't just loving on us; they were on top of our every move. They were tough. Mrs Bullock would check my homework at night, and Ms Clark would ask me about it again in the morning. Years later, Ms Clark would suggest I take a look at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, where I ultimately went and which I otherwise wouldn't have known existed.

AFTER many months of this routine, we finally got news that Mommy could be moved to a nursing home in Buffalo for long-term care. She would be back in time for Christmas.

That was the only Christmas of my childhood that I didn't care about toys. All we could think about was our mother coming back.

If I was nervous about seeing her again, I don't remember it. I just wanted to be in the same room as her, to hold her hand. When we all filed into her room at the nursing home, she was on her back in bed, with a white feeding tube in her nose. Her eyes were closed, and she could breathe independently. My beautiful mother.

Every night after dinner, we went to see her. Daddy told us not to whisper but to speak just as though she were awake in case she could hear. We sat and talked to her, watched TV, said prayers, and kissed her good night, night after night.

We didn't know whether she was conscious of any of it, but sometimes it felt like she had moments. She might tighten her grip while she was holding your hand. Sometimes she'd even open her eyes, and it felt like she was seeing you. But she never spoke again.

This lasted for several years. My parents met and fell in love when my mother was teaching college math at Wilberforce, where my father was in seminary. He had come from a long line of Baptist preachers. For her undergrad, my mother had gone to West Virginia State, at that time a Black college, then received her master's in mathematics from the University of Chicago.

Keep in mind, this was the 1940s. For a woman, and a Black woman at that, to study math at the University of Chicago, she must've been pretty special.

IT WAS because of my mother that my father became an Episcopal priest. They had both been raised Baptist, but she had become an Episcopalian in Chicago. While they were dating, she took my father to church. They were among the few Black parishioners in the pews that day.

My father was amazed, but dubious, when it came time for Communion. The priest welcomed everyone to receive the body and blood of Christ — and from a single communal chalice! Again, this was the 1940s. Jim Crow was alive and well.

The armed forces had not yet been integrated. *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* had not yet happened. The Montgomery bus boycott had not yet happened. Martin Luther King was still in seminary. And my father saw one cup from which everyone was to drink. One cup!

My father hung back, as my mother went forward. He wondered if the priest would really offer her the common cup. And if he did, would others continue to drink from the same cup? He held his breath as my mother sipped.

And as the cup was passed, the next person did drink. And the next. And the next. And the next. When he told that story, he would always say, "Any church in which Blacks and Whites drink out of the same cup knows something about the Gospel that I want to be a part of."

And so my mother led my father down a path that he probably would never have taken for himself — love in action.

MY MOTHER never did wake up from her coma. For years, we visited, and hoped. But eventually her body shut itself down. My memory of her death is vague. What I do remember vividly is the cemetery. I think it must have been the moment when I finally understood that Mommy wasn't coming back.

The day we buried her, it was frigid even for a Buffalo winter. It was a cold that wanted to crush you. That's Buffalo's winter, but that's also just death, a cold, low-life, horrible thing. "Jordan's river is chilly and cold. Chill my body but not my soul," goes the spiritual.

As they lowered her body into the ground, I started crying. I was standing next to Mrs Bullock, and she pulled me into her. "Mommy's gone," I told her. "It's so cold." Mrs Bullock rocked and rocked me. I felt the soft, scratchy hairs of her wool coat on my cheek and rubbed against them. Solid. We rocked and rocked.

That memory is a moment, and more than a moment. The way Mrs Bullock pulled me in, her coat a soft landing for a boy's suffering — this is how we lived through the whole time of Mommy's sickness and her death. We were always resting in the loving hands of our church community. Which is to say, in God's hands.

*The Most Revd Michael Curry is Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the US. This is an edited extract from his *Love is the Way: Holding onto hope in troubling times* (Hodder & Stoughton)*