

Call and Response
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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In the last week or so I've been experiencing anxiety attacks. Unannounced and unanticipated, seemingly out of the blue. I can be doing nothing more than washing a dish at the sink, when it's suddenly difficult to take a full breath. Ken and I have been trying to figure out what's going on. On the one hand, none of these episodes has a significant triggering event. On the other hand - have you seen the news lately, particularly what's happening in Minneapolis?

Now, let me be clear, this is not a cry for help (though I appreciate your concern!) I have good physical, and mental health care, and the support of my family, this community, and my clergy friends. Yet I don't live under a rock - so, it's likely that I'm absorbing a lot of the trauma of the world, because that's how I'm wired. And paying attention to what's happening to our community, and to those who are vulnerable is my job, and that is, in many ways, a privilege. But sometimes it can be a serious occupational hazard. I thank God that I'm not in this alone, that, at such a time as this, we are the people of God, together. People who try to walk in the ways of Jesus, together.

This week our texts are about calling and vocation - the ways that Jesus calls people into his mission and ministry, and how we respond. Our Gospel text is John's version of the calling of the disciples. When Jesus notices that John the Baptist's disciples are following him, he asks them, "What are you looking for?" They respond by asking him where he is staying, and he invites them to, "Come and see." The rest of the call narrative describes how various people decide to become followers of Jesus.

As one commentator describes:

Stories of "calling" and discipleship take many forms. Andrew gets a trusted recommendation and a day with Jesus; Philip jumps aboard right away; Nathanael engages in skeptical debate; ... In short, there's no single way to receive and respond to God's call, and there's plenty of room under the tent: room for those ready to take the plunge, room for those who'd rather put a toe in first — and room for those who doubt they're up to it at all.¹

We are different people, and how we understand God's call will vary. But "come and see" is an open invitation. Come - experience the ways of Jesus, the ways of love. And respond, as we are called and able to. Because the world desperately needs to experience what God is doing.

The "call and response" of discipleship seems incredibly appropriate this weekend, as we remember and honor the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Obviously, there's a lot of his wisdom to draw upon, but today I thought we'd focus on discipleship, and the tangible call and response of what became the Birmingham Campaign.

Specifically - the commitment card people had to sign in order to be part of the response organized by Dr. King and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, which was the Birmingham affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The Commitment Card read:²

I hereby pledge myself—my person and body—to the nonviolent movement.
Therefore I will keep the following ten commandments:

1. Meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. Remember always that the non—violent movement seeks justice and reconciliation — not victory.
3. Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. Sacrifice personal wishes in order that all men might be free.
6. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
7. Seek to perform regular service for others and for the world.
8. Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.
9. Strive to be in good spiritual and bodily health.
10. Follow the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.

I sign this pledge, having seriously considered what I do and with the determination and will to persevere.

Then there is a place for the person to sign their name, and to include their address and phone, and the name and address of their nearest relative.

The card concludes:

Besides demonstrations, I could also help the movement by (Circle the proper items):
Run errands, Drive my car, Fix food for volunteers, Clerical work, Make phone calls,
Answer phones, Mimeograph, Type, Print Signs, Distribute leaflets.

Friends, this year as we consider the legacy and wisdom of Martin Luther King Jr., I fear it's more than theoretical. The current political environment is treacherous, and if we are to walk in the ways of Jesus, then the call is upon us to respond as we are able.

This morning, I'm wondering what our commitment card would look like? How would we put into action the call of Jesus to be a disciple?

Following the example Dr. King established, it might say:

- 1) Pray daily
- 2) Ground ourselves in the life and ministry of Jesus
- 3) Seek justice and reconciliation
- 4) Walk and talk in the way of love
- 5) Remember that it's not about US - but about freedom and justice for all people
- 6) Be kind and courteous to all
- 7) Refrain from violence in thought, word, or deed
- 8) Seek to perform acts of service for others in need
- 9) Invest in our own spiritual, physical, and mental health

Lastly, let's add to that: 10) Keep breathing.

Just as in the civil rights movement there are a multitude of ways we can support current efforts for justice. Not everyone is called to be on the front lines, but everyone is called to respond. Though let's be completely honest with ourselves - responding will cost us. (There's a reason that the original commitment card asked for contact information for nearest relative.)

But beloved ones, NOT responding in the face of such injustice costs us more. When confronted with horrific violence against vulnerable people complacency damages our souls. Our texts remind us that whatever our story, however we are called, and however we choose to respond - God's call is never for our sake alone. It's always also for the sake of others. And ultimately for the sake of the world which God loves.

As we hear in Isaiah - It's "too light a thing" to focus only on ourselves. As overwhelming as it is to consider, God's vision is breathtakingly huge - encompassing the whole world: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."³ And yes, that can be anxiety provoking, which feels like where we started! In the days ahead, let's keep breathing, even as we are called to respond in a variety of ways.

May we invest ourselves in acts of justice, doing our best to protect and tend the most vulnerable, giving of ourselves for the well-being of the world. And may we remember that we are in this together. Together with God, with one another, and with so many others who are putting themselves forward to light the way to God's kingdom of justice for all people. Amen.

¹ Lamb of God: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany 2, Jan 12, 2026; saltproject.org

² Commitment Card, as printed and produced in 1963 by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, Birmingham Affiliate of S.C.L.C.; F.L. Shuttlesworth, President.

³ Lamb of God: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany 2, Jan 12, 2026; saltproject.org