

“The Path of Discipleship”

Isaiah 49: 1-7, John 1:29-42

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Jesus is barely dry from his baptismal soaking, when Andrew takes this astounding leap of faith. According to the account we hear this morning in John’s gospel, all it took was five words from John, “Behold the Lamb of God” and perfect strangers left behind their life to follow. I imagine many of us might need a lot more “proof” than that to make such a drastic change in our lives. Jesus has not even begun his ministry and already people are lining up to follow. Perhaps Andrew had second thoughts when he drags his brother Simon along. Perhaps he is just so excited about what might happen that he wants him to be part of it too. All Simon needs is one long, hard look from Jesus and he is hooked too. Neither of them had any idea what they were doing. However there they were, taking that first bold leap of faith.

This is the story about what happens after Jesus’ baptism. What happens to any of us once the water has dried, the ceremony has faded and life goes on? What comes next? John understood that he was sent to announce the coming Messiah. Now he understands, as he did not before, who the Messiah is. It took the Holy Spirit descending and the voice of God speaking before John could recognize Jesus as the One. Now John boldly proclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God.” People will either be drawn to Jesus wondering what it means to be the Lamb of God or they ignore this invitation because they think John is a lunatic for making such an outrageous proclamation.

John was called to do many things. Perhaps his willingness to offer his own personal testimony is the most significant. The power of personal testimony is its honesty. John takes great risk to declare, “Look, this is the Lamb of God. I didn’t recognize him at first, but I will tell you about my experience, how I came to know him, how God spoke to me and how he changed my life.” That is the essence of any personal testimony. “Let me tell you about my experience, how I came to know Jesus, what difference he makes in my life.” How many of you have had such a conversation with someone you know? Can you imagine sitting at Daybreak one morning talking with a friend and saying, “Let me tell you about Jesus...” I suspect many of you are looking for the exit sign just thinking about it.

Jesus reveals himself to each of us in different ways. John did not know that Jesus was the Messiah until the Holy Spirit spoke to him. If John did not know who Jesus was at first, it is understandable that we might not recognize Jesus. Perhaps the Holy Spirit led Andrew and Simon to take that first bold step. I believe it is the Holy Spirit that helps us move beyond our fear into new dimensions of our faith. Perhaps it is the Holy Spirit that will lead you to become a member of this church, or to teach Church School or to sign up for the Nights with Nicodemus class that is about to begin. Sometimes we can’t take that first leap of faith on our own. We need a little holy nudging to make it happen. Jesus

invites Andrew and Simon to follow their curiosity, to “come and see” for themselves, then they will be able to share their own story.

Today’s gospel lesson tells us how Jesus called those very first disciples. They did not know what they were doing, what he would call them to do, what they might be led to say about him, but they followed anyway. It takes great courage to be a disciple of Christ. It takes great courage to continue on the path when there are so many temptations to give up, to listen to the voice of the culture instead of the voice of God. In the twenty-first century I think it is even more difficult to be a disciple. With such a diversity of perspectives it is essential that we have the courage to speak the truth as we know it, to speak from our own experiences, telling the story of our own faith community, proclaiming how the Spirit has been alive in your lives even if your experience is very different from mine.

Today we remember not only the ministry of Jesus and its humble beginnings, but also the ministry of one of Jesus’ more contemporary disciples. Tomorrow we will celebrate the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. He was willing to give his life as a sacrifice for freedom and justice in the hopes that some day he might see an end to the evils of racism. Sadly, that “some day” has not yet come. Even though the dreams that Dr. King spoke of have yet to be fully realized, there are many things that we can continue to do to bring about the justice for which he gave his own life.

Martin Luther King Jr. understood Jesus’ call to discipleship. He understood where his discipleship would take him. He accepted his call as one who would bring peace to his people, not as the Messiah, but one who, like John, would witness to the Messiah. One of the hallmarks of Martin Luther King’s ministry was his commitment to nonviolence. He was passionate about seeking justice and lasting transformation in a nonviolent way. Today we have an opportunity to commit ourselves, either personally or corporately, to this compassionate nonviolent way of living. As we remember the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., The Institute for Peace and Justice invites Christians throughout the world to sign a pledge of nonviolence, whether as a congregation, a family or personally. This pledge of nonviolence has 7 key components.

The Pledge begins with respect—respecting others and us. Respect means building others up, not tearing them down. It means avoiding hateful words as well as physical attacks. This call to respect others is not limited to family members or members of this community but must be broader to embrace all peoples.

The second component of the Pledge centers on communicating better, working diligently to solve problems peacefully and to find safe ways to express our anger. Martin Luther King Jr. taught us many important lessons about finding peaceful solutions to social problems. Like Dr. King, we must realize that our nonviolent efforts may sometimes be met with anger and violence. We can work to solve problems peacefully only if we let go of our desire to seek revenge. We hope that those who work for justice in nonviolent ways will not be met with more violence, however, the volatile situations that prevail throughout the world can be discouraging. This gives me even stronger

resolve to find ways to speak the truth in love in the hopes that such honesty may be a first step toward peace.

The third component of the Pledge asks us to listen carefully to others, especially to those with whom we disagree. Careful listening and attending to the feelings and needs of others can be difficult. Careful listening is a wonderful daily discipline and a way to become more attuned to the voice of God in our lives. Jesus calls new disciples daily just as he did Andrew and Peter. God invites us to be open and attentive to the voice of Jesus coming through the people with whom we interact every day.

Forgiveness is the fourth component of the pledge. We are called to apologize and make amends when we have hurt others, to forgive those who have injured us and to let go of those grudges that we so often carry around for months or even years. Jesus is our model of forgiveness. Forgiving, as Jesus was able to forgive is essential if we are to live in peace with each other.

The fifth component asks us to respect nature, to take better care of the earth and its resources. There is a cost to maintain our affluent lifestyles. I believe Jesus would invite us to live more simply, to let go of our dependency on stuff, to see the value in all of God's creation and not as something to own or exploit. In his prophetic speech "Beyond Vietnam" in 1967 Dr. King said:

"We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'people-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable to being conquered..."

The sixth component encourages us to play creatively, to play for fun and not just for winning, and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny or acceptable. This is perhaps one of the most difficult components because as a culture we do not take seriously the importance of limiting violence in our recreational activities. This afternoon many of us will be glued to the television rooting for either our beloved Patriots or Giants to win their respective football game. Whether we like to admit it or not, football is a violent sport. Many of the films we enjoy are filled with violence. The video games our children play are violent. The threshold for violence gets lowered as we become more and more sensitized to its effect. Nonviolence must permeate even our recreational activities. Until we see the correlation between accepting violence as entertainment and perpetuating violence as a means of getting what we want, there can be no lasting peace.

The last component of the Pledge of Nonviolence challenges us to act courageously to confront violence and injustice wherever we find it. Dr. King's life presents a powerful model of such courage. We can write to the President or our representatives urging them to make changes in policy that will lead to peace. This year we will have the privilege of casting our vote for a new president. Perhaps the quality of peacemaker might influence the decision we make. We can attend a peace rally and hold a sign or light a candle to

declare that war is not a way to make peace. We can turn off television programs that depict senseless violence. We can refrain from buying our children violent video games. The way toward peace and nonviolence starts with a personal commitment to work for peace, to live a nonviolent life, to follow the path of discipleship wherever it might take us.

As we approach the Lenten season I encourage you to read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life with fresh eyes. Today's gospel story is just the beginning. See in these stories the many ways that Jesus invites us to this nonviolent way of life. See where violence is used and to what end. Pray for a deeper understanding of Jesus' life and ministry and for a deeper commitment to follow in his path toward peace. We do not always know where Jesus will lead us. Those first disciples had no idea what Jesus had in store for them. We know however, where violence leads us. Perhaps signing the Pledge of Nonviolence is a faithful, new step on the path of discipleship. May it be so!!

Amen

Sources:

"Blogging toward Sunday: John Testified," Erin Martin, John 1: 29-42, January 20, 2008.

"A Call to Discipleship and the Pledge of Nonviolence: Reflections on John 1: 35-42 and the Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.," Institute for Peace and Justice, January 20, 2008.

Pledge of Nonviolence

Making peace must start within oneself
I commit myself as best I can to become a nonviolent and peaceable person:

To Respect Self and Others

To respect myself, to affirm others and to avoid uncaring criticism, hateful words, physical attacks and self-destructive behavior.

To Communicate Better

To share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger, and to work at solving problems peacefully.

To Listen

To listen carefully to one another, especially those who disagree with me, and to consider others' feelings and needs rather than insist on having my own way.

To Forgive

To apologize and make amends when I have hurt another, to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.

To Respect Nature

To treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.

To Play Creatively

To select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny or acceptable.

To Be Courageous

To challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community, and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.

This is my pledge. These are my goals. I will check myself on what I have pledged every month, for the next twelve months so that I can become a more peaceable person.

Sign below:

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For addition versions of the pledge and other resources for peacemaking, please refer to the website: www.ipj-ppj.org (The Institute for Peace and Justice)