



My friends, I come to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

As promised, I am writing the first of two letters to you. In a few days please be on the lookout for a letter about our ongoing planning for safely resuming in-person gatherings. Today, as your priest, I offer you my reflections and guidance after our nation's past week of racial tension, ideological division, protests and tragic bloodshed.

My mind was brought back to a time not long ago, when our Presiding Bishop, The Most Reverend Michael Curry, addressed the church after a white supremacist killed Heather Heyer and injured eight other people in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. Almost three years later, Bishop Curry could have been speaking to us today when he said:

In this moment, when there is a sense of darkness in our land--when sometimes hope feels and seems far away, this moment when we must now remember new martyrs, like young Heather Heyer--it may help to remember the words and the wisdom of the martyrs of the past.

The year was 1967. The nation was in turmoil. There was war abroad and turmoil within, and anxiety as to whether or not the very democracy would hold. There were riots in our streets, racial tension and animosity, and levels of poverty that had revealed themselves to a surprised nation. In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King

wrote and published his last book. The title of that book may well help us now. It was titled "Where do we go from here: chaos or community?"

Where do we go from here: chaos or community?

A moment of crisis and of struggle is also a moment of decision. We are in a moment of decision:

Chaos or community?

I'm a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ because I truly believe that Jesus of Nazareth has shown us the way--the way beyond the chaos to community--to *God's Beloved Community*. Jesus came and, through the way of love, showed us how to be right and reconciled with the God who created us, and has shown us how to be right and reconciled with each other as children of that one God who has created us all...That is the very mission of God in this world and that is the work of Jesus and the people who follow him. Moments of crisis are times of decision. This is a time of decision. We who follow Jesus of Nazareth have made a decision to follow the way that leads to Beloved Community.

We together as The Episcopal Church can participate in the work of Jesus, following his way, the work of reconciliation--the work of reconciling us beyond all our divisions--of working together with God and all people of good will to realize the Beloved Community of God.

Three years later his words still ring true, yet we clearly have much work to do to be that Beloved Community to which we are called.

I grieve right now. My heart grieves for the 13 people who have been killed since the death of George Floyd, including people who were peacefully protesting against racial violence, police officers serving their country, and bystanders who were just trying to live their lives. I did not know Chris Beaty of Indianapolis personally, but he was my age and we had friends in common who are reeling over the loss of what Chris would have brought to this world. I am friends, however, with several of the clergy and parishioners at St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington DC, who were struck with tear gas while working at their own church because the President wanted them moved so that he could use their church. I am friends with The Rev. Stephanie Spellers, Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism, Reconciliation, and Stewardship of Creation, who reminded me that Jesus taught his disciples the fundamental idea that the way we love

the least of those among us is the way we love Christ himself--I cannot now get the image from my mind of the face of Jesus on George Floyd as he was being killed.

All this is to say this feels intensely personal to me, as I know it does for many of you. I believe it is because this pain, grief, and anger feel so personal to us that it has exacerbated the already deep political polarization in our nation. This does not feel like a Republican and a Democrat verbally sparring on cable news--this feels like our friends and family suffering. It is tragic because we all desire to be God's Beloved Community, but we get lost in our worldly divisions over how to achieve it.

In the midst of these worldly divisions I am thankful for the guidance of our church leaders. St. Stephen's is blessed to be a part of The Episcopal Diocese of Texas, called at our very conception to prayerfully hear our bishops, the people we ourselves called through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to lead us through times such as these. Our bishops, along with Episcopal bishops across the nation, the Presiding Bishop over the entire Episcopal Church, and the Archbishop of the worldwide Anglican Communion are in agreement in their guidance offered, which I have included here:

<https://www.epicenter.org/article/episcopal-diocese-of-texas-bishops-statement>

Following their leadership, and as your priest, I say that we cannot wait while our division needs reconciliation. There are steps we all can take and must take together. I offer here several first steps for us, seeking to look through division and into the Beloved Community:

First, as always, is to humbly pray to our God. Seek to be reminded of our mission when we wander astray, strengthened when the call seems overwhelming, comforted when we get hurt, and awakened not to our will but God's will for all creation. This Sunday I will be adding a special Litany for Racial Reconciliation. This Litany may be the first step but cannot be the last step in our work together.

Second, I appeal to everyone to be mindful of your fellow human beings. I have seen a great deal of social media comments that, even if in their substance are justified, are conveyed in hurtful and counterproductive ways. We do not gain anything toward the Beloved Community or Racial Reconciliation if we shut down the conversation. Saying the correct thing in a disrespectful way loses the chance for healing. Remember St. Francis's call to seek first to understand before being understood. There is not enough of seeking to understand one another on social media and we can all be a part of improving that.

Third, this Fall at St. Stephen's we will redouble our efforts at engaging in the work of Racial Reconciliation. We got waylaid by new rector searches and hurricanes but this is important work to which we are all called and I ask you to engage in it with us. With the help of the Episcopal Health Foundation we plan to bring back [\*Traces of the Trade\*](#) and to begin our work with [\*One Human Race\*](#). These resources will help us at St. Stephen's discern together how to be a people working toward bringing about that Beloved Community we desire.

Fourth, there are things you can do right now while we wait to regather:

Please look at the Southern Poverty Law Center's great [\*Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Resource Guide\*](#).

If you're a fan of watching videos, watch Trinity Episcopal Church Wall Street's [\*Sacred Conversations for Racial Justice\*](#)

For all my fellow parents trying to make sense of this time for their children right now, there are some very good resources available on how to talk (emphasis on *talk*) with your children, including [\*Resources for Talking with your Kids about Race and Racism\*](#) by Bounceback Parenting

To my book readers out there I highly recommend [\*Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing\*](#) and [\*Racing to Justice: Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society\*](#).

Lastly, if my long letter here leaves you wanting more, please read this fantastic article by my friend and colleague, former Washington DC police officer and current associate rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in DC, The Rev. Dr. Gayle Fisher-Stewart: [\*To Serve and Protect: The Police, Race, and the Episcopal Church in the Black Lives Matter Era\*](#), published in the Anglican Theological Review.

There are many more ways in which we can serve and will serve together, so this is only a start. I do pray that each of us hears the Gospel of Christ calling to us. Jesus's words ring as true and an desperately needed as ever:

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ...First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Mt. 7:3,5)

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (Mt. 25:37-40)

“Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that also should do as I have done to you.” (Jn. 13:13-15)

My friends, I pray we all be prepared to take the log out of our own eyes before we try to take the speck out of our neighbor’s eye. I pray that we will look upon the very least of those among us as someone to love and serve. I pray that following Jesus’s example will bring us closer the justice, reconciliation, and healing we need.

May God’s blessing be upon you, remind you of your worthiness of love, and your call to share that love abundantly with the world.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a large initial 'S'.

The Rev. Steven M. Balke, Jr.  
Rector, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Beaumont, Texas