

***A Sermon for the Commemoration of  
Jonathan Myrick Daniels, Martyr***

**August 16, 2015**

**Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia**

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*Lord, you give the great commission: "Heal the sick and preach the word."  
Lest the Church neglect its mission and the Gospel go unheard,  
help us witness to your purpose with renewed integrity;  
with the Spirit's gifts empower us for the work of ministry.*

From the Book of Proverbs we hear these words:

*"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk from you. Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil."*

Our church, in being faithful to the Gospel, often finds itself at the center of matters that call for justice. Our decisions as a church, our discussions, our prayers, our actions, and the witness of so many have demonstrated that we are often called to strive for justice as we hold before us the vision of the Holy City of God. Walter Russell Bowie, had a vision for what that City of God would look like when, in 1910, he wrote the words to the hymn we just sang:

*O holy city seen of John,  
Where Christ the Lamb doth reign,  
Within whose foursquare walls shall come  
No night, nor need, nor pain,  
And where the tears are wiped from eyes  
That shall not weep again.*

*O shame to us who rest content  
While lust and greed for gain*

*In street and shop and tenement  
Wring gold from human pain,  
And bitter lips in blind despair  
Cry, "Christ hath died in vain."*

Today marks an important anniversary in this country and in the church. Bishop Shannon Johnston has asked that on this Sunday, throughout the Diocese of Virginia, churches observe the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of Jonathan Myrick Daniels who was killed in the streets of Hayneville, Alabama at the height of the strife in the Civil Rights Movement. How often we remember where we were at the precise moment when we heard the news of something that happened such as the Kennedy assassinations or the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. I can't remember last Tuesday yet etched in my brain is the memory of sitting at breakfast while on a visit with a friend here in Richmond who lived in Windsor Farms in August of 1965. I had been working that summer at St. John's Church in Jersey City, a parish that was deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement. The contrast between the streets of Jersey City and Windsor Farms as well as my lovely home in Massachusetts where I had grown up was a stark contrast indeed. It's strange, the minute details we remember. As we were sitting at breakfast, her collie dog was lying on the floor beside our breakfast table. It appeared that he was having a dream as doggies often do. I remember her saying that he must be chasing rabbits! Suddenly there came a news bulletin on Television. There had been a shooting in Alabama. A young civil rights worker, Jonathan Daniels had just been shot outside a grocery store in Hayneville. I remember that moment vividly. The news had a profound impact on me.

Jonathan Daniels was a graduate of VMI where he was valedictorian of his class of 1961. He was preparing for ordination as an Episcopal priest at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In the summer of 1965, during the Civil Rights movement, he responded to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's call for "people of good will" to stand with the oppressed people in Selma. He and a number of others were jailed for opposing slavery's legacy, that of continuing racial discrimination. After their release, on August 20, a hot Alabama day, about 100 yards from the jail, a man named Tom Coleman aimed his gun directly at a young African-American woman named Ruby Sales

as he shouted racial epithets at her. Jonathan pulled her aside placing himself in range of the gunman who fired point blank at him. Jonathan died instantly. Tom Coleman was acquitted by an all white male jury of any charges and never served a day in jail.

Jonathan Daniels, a student of war at VMI is now remembered as a man of peace by his Alma Mater, VMI. The Episcopal Church has added August 14th, the anniversary of his death, to its Church Calendar. It so happened that at the General Convention when Jonathan Daniels was designated a martyr and his name placed on the calendar of Lesser Feasts and Fasts, two who were instrumental in bringing Jonathan's sacrifice of his life to the attention of the church were Jack and Nancy Lawton. Jack was my successor as rector at St. Stephen's, Westborough and a man of strong convictions in matters of justice as was Nancy. It was Jack and Nancy, as I understand it, who led the effort to have Jonathan Daniels recognized as a contemporary American martyr on the church calendar.

After graduating from VMI with top honors, Jonathan went through a period of serious discernment. After the death of his father who had been a model for him, he went through a faith crisis and even left the church. An experience at The Church of the Advent in Boston, however, renewed his faith. He told of how he decided to return to the church and how God's not so gentle nudge called him to seek Holy Orders. In a sermon he preached at his home parish in Keene, New Hampshire, before entering seminary, he spoke of his vision for ministry: "Somebody must visit the sick, the lonely, the frightened and the sorrowing. Somebody must comfort the discouraged. Somebody must argue lovingly and convincingly with anguished doubters. Somebody must remind the sick soul that healing is within his grasp, and urge him to take the medicine when his disease seems more attractive" Little did Jonathan know then what his prophetic words would come to mean. There are sicknesses of our society as well as sicknesses of the body. Sometimes these diseases seem to us more attractive than taking the medicine that might lead to a cure, especially when it comes to a disease of our society. Sometimes that medicine comes in the form of allowing our eyes to look directly forward, and our gaze straight before us, keeping straight the path of our feet so that our ways will be sure, not swerving to the right or to the left, and by turning our feet away from evil, to use the image we heard in the Book of Proverbs this morning.

Our Episcopal Church, when it has remained faithful to the Gospel, has often been instrumental in matters of justice. At times, the church has had to be confronted for its failure to oppose racism and for its own policies and practices of segregation, yet it has moved forward in its witness to justice. It was in 1958, for example, at General Convention, that the Episcopal Church took a stand opposing the death penalty, a penalty that among its other flaws, is used disproportionately against African- Americans. That stand has been reaffirmed in multiple General Conventions since as well as in our Diocese of Virginia. Only recently, in Connecticut, Episcopal Bishops and others were influential in the state's decision to abolish the death penalty in Connecticut.

The words in the second stanza of one of our beloved national songs, Hymn 719, "O beautiful for spacious skies", form a powerful prayer for this great country of ours, for in that prayer we sing, "*America, America, God mend thine every flaw. Confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law.*" Katherine Lee Bates, who wrote the words to this hymn, knew that our work as a nation is not finished as we continue to strive for liberty and justice for all in America. For every generation, there are continuing challenges that must be met. There are continuing discussions that must be had, and God is ever calling the Church to engage in these essential discussions.

While progress has been made in many areas since the Civil Rights Movement, there is still much that needs to be addressed in matters of racial justice. There is our long cherished freedom to vote, a freedom long over due and finally won when in August of 1965, the President of the United States signed into law the Voting Rights Act making it possible for African-Americans to have more access to the right to vote. That freedom for many, however, has recently been challenged by an increasing number of laws proposed in many states that, if enacted, serve to make it more difficult for people to have access to the right to vote. Most often, these laws affect minorities disproportionately. Someone once said, and it bears repeating, that a democracy, with its freedoms for which we give thanks, does not sully itself by suppressing the precious freedom to vote. If people of faith do not speak out, and if people lose their freedom to vote, then we as a nation will

have to repent in this generation, not merely for the actions of those proposing those laws, but for the silence of us all. May Jonathan Daniels and people like him be for us an example, yet not only an example but an inspiration for us.

There are many matters that this great nation still faces with all its blessings and all its freedoms. There is our culture of gun violence which is first and foremost a spiritual matter for us all as a nation. While gun violence affects us all regardless of race, African Americans are disproportionately victims of this national disgrace. *“America, America, God mend thine every flaw. Confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law.”* God is calling you and me, as baptized members of the Body of Christ to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being, and to make no peace with oppression because we live under the grace of God, a grace that we have received from Jesus’ life, his own death for us, and his resurrection. It was for him a costly gift to us.

And so today we remember Jonathan Daniels, his witness to justice, his costly gift to us all. That grace that you and I have received can at times be costly as well. Jesus called the twelve and sent them out to follow him and he calls you and me to follow him. For Jonathan Daniels, it meant giving his life. For us it means that God calls to remember the sacrifice that Jonathan and others have made and, following their example, to make no peace ourselves with oppression of any kind. And of us God asks one more thing, that we never lose hope that by our prayers and witness and by our actions, God’s justice will one day prevail.

*Lord, you bless with words assuring:*

*“I am with you to the end.”*

*Faith and hope and love restoring,*

*may we serve as you intend, and,*

*amid the cares that claim us,*

*hold in mind eternity;*

*with the Spirit’s gifts empower us*

*for the work of ministry. Amen.*