

Called to Sacrifice

Mark 8:31-34

February 25, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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This morning's sermon is a sort of fraternal twin to the one I gave last week – not the same message in a different guise, but more like the other side of the same coin. Last week we heard the story of Peter's mother-in-law, whose fever Jesus cured and who rose to serve those around her. And I said,

Sometimes, as Christians, we are called to do difficult or dangerous things, to stand up against evil in the name of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, we may have to be willing to drink from the same bitter cup that Jesus did. But [most of the time, most of us] don't have to do grand things at all to be true to our call as Christians.... We [only] have to [be of service to] the people around us.

That was last week's scripture and last week's message. This week, our scripture reminds us that sometimes, some of us ARE called to a life – and perhaps even a death – of sacrifice, as Jesus was. And so, this morning I want to tell you the story of a modern martyr, one who grew up right here in New Hampshire. This is the story of Jonathan Daniels.

Jonathan grew up in Keene, in a Congregational family, the son of a physician. His family was deeply devoted to service, and Jonathan inhaled that value from them. As a young man, he was attracted to the beautiful liturgy and ritual of the Episcopal church. He felt a call to ministry as early as his high school years, and eventually – in 1963 – he entered Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to pursue ordination.

While Jonathan was studying Greek and theology and scripture, The Civil Rights movement was meeting violent resistance in the South. On March 7, 1965, Bloody Sunday, more than five hundred peaceful civil rights protestors began a march from Selma, Alabama to the state capital in Montgomery, fifty miles away. The march was led by Rev. Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a young John Lewis (later, Congressman John Lewis) of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Its purpose was to call for Black citizens to be allowed to register to vote and for them to exercise that right.

The march began at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. When marchers reached the top of the arch of the bridge, they saw, on the other side, a wall of state troopers and a county posse. The sheriff had issued a call for all White men over the age of twenty-one to report to the courthouse and be deputized on the morning of the march. Rev. Hosea Williams tried to speak to the commander but was told there was nothing to discuss. Seconds later, the troopers and posse began shoving the marchers to the ground and beating them with nightsticks. Another detachment of troopers fired tear gas. Others charged on horseback. Marchers were severely wounded. Some were unconscious. John Lewis's skull was broken.

Television shared the images of this awful brutality to the nation. It was a turning point in our national consciousness. And it was a turning point for Jonathan Daniels. After the march, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called for clergy and students – meaning White clergy and students – from across the nation to join the movement. Jonathan Daniels took a leave of absence from seminary and set out for Alabama. There, he lived with a Black family and worked to integrate the local Episcopal church. When he brought groups of Black residents with him to the services, the record says that they were “not well received.” One Sunday morning, at Communion time, they were served, but only after all the White congregants had been served, so that no White person would have to drink from a cup that a Black person had already drunk from.

That summer, Jonathan also helped to assemble lists of federal, state, and local agencies and groups that could offer assistance to those in need. He tutored children. He helped local families apply for aid. And he worked to register Black voters. It all sounds so normal now, doesn't it? But this work was so threatening to the White establishment of Alabama, that it evoked violent response.

On August 14, 1965, Jonathan was one of a group of 29 protesters who went to Fort Deposit, Alabama, to picket its Whites-only stores. All of the protesters were arrested. They were transported to jail in a nearby town in a garbage truck. They were

held for six days in a facility that lacked air conditioning. Authorities refused to accept bail for anyone unless everyone was bailed.

Finally, on August 20, the prisoners were released without transport back to Fort Deposit. The group waited near the courthouse jail while one of their members called for transport. Jonathan with three others—a White Catholic priest and two young Black women—walked to the nearby Varner's Cash Store to buy some sodas. It was one of the few stores that served Blacks. In the doorway to the store stood Tom Coleman, an unpaid special deputy, who was holding a shotgun. Coleman leveled his gun at seventeen-year-old Ruby Sales. Daniels pushed her down and caught the full blast of the shotgun himself and was killed instantly. The Catholic priest who was with him grabbed the other young Black woman and ran with her. Coleman shot him as well, critically wounding him.

Tom Coleman was indicted on manslaughter charges because he claimed Jonathan had threatened him with a knife. He was acquitted even of manslaughter by a jury of twelve White men who deliberated just two hours. After the acquittal, he said he would do the same thing again if he got the chance.

Upon learning of Daniels' murder, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "One of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels."<sup>[7]</sup>

Ruby Sales, the young Black woman Jonathan saved, at the cost of his own life, went on to attend Episcopal Theological School, where Jonathan had been enrolled. She worked as a human rights advocate in Washington, DC and founded an inner-city mission dedicated to him.

In 1991, twenty-six years after his death, the Episcopal Church designated Jonathan Daniels a martyr, and August 14<sup>th</sup> is the day of remembrance for his sacrifice. I find that date interesting. It is not the day of his death, but the day of the protest at Fort Deposit, the act of integrity and Christian love that inevitably led to Jonathan's death six days later.

Here at the end of Black History Month, this story reminds us that the struggle for racial justice belongs not just to those who are oppressed. It belongs to all of us. And sometimes, some of us are called to more than service. Sometimes, in order to stand with integrity in our faith, we are called to sacrifice, to answer Jesus' invitation to take up our cross and follow him.

This is not an invitation that any of us wants to hear. Jesus himself prayed that he might not have to drink of the bitter cup of sacrifice. We may offer that same prayer as well, and God will not hold that wish against us. As I said last week, most of the time, most of us don't have to do grand things at all to be true to our call as Christians.... We only have to be of service to the people around us.

While we pray that we are not called to sacrifice, let us honor the memory of those who did hear that call, who responded. Let us give thanks for those who said, "Here I am Lord. Send me."

Amen