

Decades ago, in the early 1960s there was a young man, born and raised in Keene NH, who wrestled with the meaning of life and death and vocation. Maybe he wrestled with God, not in a dissimilar way to how Jacob wrestled with God at the ford of the Jabbock River. This young man was smart and caring and attracted to many subjects in college; medicine, law, writing, and even considered going into the ministry. But he wasn't sure that he had sufficient faith to be a leader in the Church. One Easter day he attended the service at the Church of the Advent in Boston and had a profound religious experience. All his striving with God and with people led to a new conviction in his heart that he was called to ordained ministry. And so, Jonathan Myrick Daniels entered seminary at Episcopal Theological School.

As he studied there he heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak and felt a call to march with him in Selma, Alabama. After that he felt so moved to work in the civil rights movement that he got permission to stay in the South and only come back up to Massachusetts to take his finals for that semester. He did so, and passed the exams.

That semester in Alabama he lived with a black family in Selma, tutored children, helped poor people find aid, and attended a local Episcopal Church with groups of black people that he brought along. The white Episcopal Church there was not welcoming, he recalls.

He returned to the North and one evening at Evening Prayer he heard the Magnificat, the passage from the Gospel of Luke that I just read, "He has put down the mighty from their seat and has lifted up the humble and meek. He has filled the hungry with good things."

With summer of 1965 now upon him, he received funding from the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity and headed back south to work again, now in the sweltering summer heat to help people in need.

And then, exactly 55 years ago today, on August 2, 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed by our United States Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Under this law no local or state jurisdiction could pass their own discriminatory voting laws. And no literacy or language test could thwart voters who wished to register to vote.

So, Jonathan, along with other seminarians went back to Selma to get to work helping to register African Americans to vote. He said, "I knew that I must go to Selma. The Virgin Mary's song was to grow more and more dear to me in the weeks ahead."

On August 14 of that year, Jonathan went with others to Fort Deposit, Alabama to protest against stores that only served white customers. He and 28 others were arrested and taken in a garbage

truck to a jail in Hayneville Alabama. The juveniles among the group were released the next day, but Jonathan and the other adults were held in a terribly hot room for a week.

They made a decision that if they couldn't make bail for everyone then then they would stay in jail together. But then, inexplicably, they were all released on August 20 but not given any transportation. So, as some made phone calls at a pay phone to try to get rides back to their homes, Jonathan and three others went to a little store called Varner's Cash Store to buy some cold drinks.

But trouble was waiting for them there. A man named Tom Coleman appeared and blocked their way into the store. He had a shotgun and a pistol and he leveled his gun a young black girl, 15 year old Ruby Sales. Daniels saw what was happening and dove in front of Ruby just as Coleman pressed the trigger and Jonathan Myrick Daniels was instantly killed. Two others turned and ran, a Roman Catholic priest and another young girl. The priest, Fr. Richard Morrisroe, was also shot by Tom Coleman in the back. He was badly injured but survived.

Coleman was indicted on a charge of manslaughter, but an all-white jury found him not guilty. He said that he shot the men in self-defense even though, of course, Daniels and Morrisroe had been unarmed. Ruby was traumatized by the event and her family received death threats, but she bravely testified at the trial of Tom Coleman. One year later Coleman was interviewed by CBS and declared that he had no regrets about shooting the two men. And said that if he had it to do over he would still shoot them both. Coleman went on to live to age 86. He died in 1997.

Fr. Morrisroe recovered although never fully. He left the ministry and became an attorney. He now lives in Chicago with his family.

Ruby Sales went on to attend seminary herself, the same one that Jonathan Daniels attended, and by the way, that is the same school where our bishop, Ian Douglas taught and there met Ruby Sales. She is still a civil rights advocate and has worked most recently in the Black Lives Matter movement and she founded The Spirit House Project which is dedicated to Jonathan Daniels and to justice and equality for all people.

The Episcopal Church declared Daniels a martyr and in 1991 he was added to our commemorations of Holy Women and Holy Men. He is officially remembered every August 14 and a pilgrimage is arranged for every year by the Diocese of Alabama.

I'll let Jonathan have the last word here this morning:

"The doctrine of the creeds, the enacted faith of the sacraments, were the essential preconditions of the experience itself. The faith with which I went to Selma has not changed; it has grown...I began to know in my bones and sinews that I had been truly baptized into the Lord's death and resurrection...with them, the black men and white men, with all life, in him whose Name is above all the names that the nations shout...We are indelibly and unspeakably one."

Sources: *Holy Women, Holy Men*, Wikipedia