

I Will, With God's Help

This past Monday, August 14th, was the 14th anniversary of my Ordination to the Priesthood. The anniversary always slips by me until I begin my prayers, in which I remember who is being commemorated on that day in the Church. August 14th is the day we remember Jonathan Myrick Daniels.

Jonathan was an Episcopal seminarian and civil rights activist. On August 20, 1965 a shotgun-wielding construction worker, Tom Coleman, who was also a special county deputy in Haynesville Alabama, assassinated Jonathan as he was leaving a country store in Alabama.

Jonathan was murdered in cold blood while shielding 17-year-old Ruby Sales. His selfless act saved the life of the young black civil rights activist. They were both working in the Civil Rights Movement of Lowndes County in order to integrate public places and to register black voters after the passage of the Voting Rights Act that very summer. He had spent some of the previous weeks held in a jail cell for six days. The Episcopal Church named Jonathan as a Martyr of the Church in 1991.

In his diary, this bright young man from New Hampshire had written:

I lost fear in the black belt [1] when I began to know in my Bones and sinews that I had been truly baptized into the Lord's death and Resurrection, that in the only sense that really matters I am already dead, and my life is hid with Christ in God. I began to lose self-righteousness when I discovered the extent to which my behavior was motivated by worldly desires and by the self-seeking messianism of Yankee deliverance! The point is simply, of course, that one's motives are usually mixed, and one had better know it.

As I contemplated Jonathan's life and death this past Monday, I was heartbroken to think of the events in Charlottesville and the emboldened hatred of the KKK, Nazi's, and all of the others whose souls are blackened and twisted by their hate. It felt as though his life and the lives of all of those who died so that this country might finally become that to which it has always aspired—a place of liberty, freedom, justice, mercy and equality for ALL was possibly in vain.

I have been wrestling all week with what to say in this week's message—what can I possibly say? Presiding Bishop Michal Curry has asked us to pray and yes, a thousand times yes, may we all pray at this time for all in Charlottesville, for Heather Heyer's family, and all who were injured when a Nazi protestor drove his vehicle wantonly into a crowd.

Heather was among those people who were there to stare down hate and call for justice and, as we say, in our Baptismal covenant, "Renounce the Satan and all of the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God." (BCP page 302).

Those gathered in that crowd were not necessarily Episcopalians, nor had they likely ever heard of our Baptismal Covenant, but that is what they were doing.

I don't know how many times in Baptismal preparation I have had to reach back into history for examples of what it meant to renounce Satan and all of the spiritual forces of wickedness, and it is my great sorrow that I now have a contemporary example.

In times like these, when I don't know what to say to you that hasn't been said, or how to know how I can best be a force for good in such times, our Baptismal Covenant is a wonderful place to start. I can read the power of its words in light of the torch-wielding White supremacist and Nazi's in Charlottesville and clearly understand the meaning of the words I quoted above.

I also vow again in such times as these, as I am renouncing the evil forces of white supremacy and the Nazis and other groups who spread such terror, that I will, "Put my whole trust in God's grace and love (BCP 302) as I actively move to do God's will that calls me to, "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving my neighbor as myself" and "Strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." (BCP 305).

I don't know many things these days, but I do know that white supremacy is evil, this country has no place for Nazi's and that the people of God, like never before in current history, are called to speak up and out against hatred and marginalization in its many forms.

I encourage you to go to your Book of Common Prayer (BCP) or come by the church and borrow one, and turn to page 299 where the Baptismal service begins and then go to page 304 where the Renewal of our Baptismal Covenant begins. Wrap yourselves in these vows, think of the small tiny ways you can enact them in your daily lives. Be fearless and relentless in your own self-examination and dare to see those places in your hearts and minds where fear stops you from acting in radical love.

We all know the quotes from the Civil Rights movement of the 50's and 60's, we all know the bloody history of white supremacy and the Nazi movement. Let's all act now against hatred, counter it with love for those who most desperately need it. Jesus tells us, "Be not afraid." I exhort the same. BE not afraid. BE love, BE mercy. Reject casual racism and cruelty and marginalization in its many forms.

In these precarious times, may we live our Baptismal Covenant with all of our hearts and dare to be the Love of Christ in this world as Jonathan Myrick Daniels dared to be in his own time. May his courage and sacrifice of love never be forgotten and may we join with him in the great communion of saints as we eradicate hatred, racism and bigotry once and for all.

Grace and Peace,
Stephanie

[1] Refers to the color of the soil in this region, but was often mistaken for referring to the plight of black people during this time.