

Give Thanks for Jonathan Daniels' Spirit

The Cloak, July 2022

Last Monday, David and I attended the evening parish meeting to discuss where we are at, as they say, and where we are going. And one of the big discussion items was the Diocesan proposal to pay reparations for the grave injustices that were visited upon African Americans during the years of slavery and the Jim Crow aftermath. The proposal was brought forward toward the end of the last Diocesan gathering and was tabled for further discussion until churches in the Diocese also had a chance to reflect on and discuss the idea within parish gatherings.

And discuss we did in a most lively way! The sense I gathered from the meeting was that the church's money might be better spent on targeting current and future injustices against minorities today, including fairer and better housing opportunities, upgraded schools, access to health care, and so on. In other words, a focus on concrete actions where money spent now and in the future might go a long way in alleviating injustices that movements like Black Lives Matter and efforts to increase voter opportunities and affordable housing are aimed at addressing.

Which actually brings me to the topic of Jonathan Daniels and why I think his life and death are relevant to this overall topic. As described in Bill Mims' commentary in last Sunday's Richmond Times Dispatch, Daniels graduated from VMI some 60 years ago when he gave the valedictory address for his class at its graduation ceremony. He then became a graduate student at Harvard, but after a religious conversion experience, he decided instead to attend The Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Mass., and study for the Episcopal priesthood.

To make a long story short and as Mims eloquently told it, after the beating of peaceful marchers in March 1965 in Selma, Ala., Daniels and others traveled to Selma to work for civil rights ... and there he lost his life and is honored to this day as a martyr for the faith. In fact, Daniels is one of the Episcopal church's saints, given his own Feast Day in the liturgical year, Aug. 14. In *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (1997), the commentary reads: "Jailed on August 14 for joining a picket line, Jonathan and his companions were unexpectedly released. Aware that they were in danger, four of them walked to a small store. As sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales reached the top step of the entrance, a man with a gun appeared, cursing her. Jonathan pulled her to one side to shield her from the unexpected threats. As a result, he was killed by a blast from the 12-gauge gun." (p. 326)

Interestingly, nowhere in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* is it mentioned that Daniels had been a Virginia Military Institute (VMI) cadet. When we lived in Lexington, Va., before coming to Richmond, I vividly remember attending a conference in Daniels' honor at VMI which included a

panel discussion. On the panel sat Ruby Sales, the now grown woman who Daniels had saved from death. So I called my go-to historian and dear friend Charles Bryan, former Director of the Virginia Historical Society but also a former VMI cadet, to ask him about Daniels' affiliation with VMI. And yes indeed, Charlie confirmed what Mims' commentary had asserted about his cadet status. In fact, for the last decade or so, VMI has honored Daniels' memory. Charlie said, "Although he was never a General or military officer, nevertheless he sacrificed his life in service to his country. In fact, VMI established the Jonathan Daniels Award to recognize those who gave service to humanity. Jimmy Carter was the first to receive that award, and Congressman John Lewis was thus honored more recently."

Now you may be wondering what all this has to do with our parish meetings and discussion of reparations or alternative solutions to issues of racial injustice in our current culture and society. Turning back to Lesser Feasts and Fasts, I was struck by writings that Daniels himself penned in papers and letters left behind during his stay in Selma. Somehow I think the words he wrote were also echoed in the spirit that hovered over our discussion last Monday. So let me close this little piece with those words for us to ponder: He writes:

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 races and nations shout. ... We are indelibly and unspeakably one. (p. 326)

Maybe I'll give Mims the last word here. He quotes John Lewis, whose beating in Selma galvanized Daniels to action. Lewis said that Daniels "gave his life to redeem not just the soul of Alabama but the soul of a nation. May his selfless and courageous example redeem us to achieve the decency and nobility of which we are capable."

Indeed, food for thought!