

HOME
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There can be a gravitational pull to this place. Sometimes it's a mid-week visit that draws a person who simply needs to go into the sanctuary and sit, think, and pray. Sometimes a person is drawn here who needs an ear to bend or who, quite frankly, needs financial help of some kind. And sometimes people show up on a Sunday morning without any particular agenda, instinctively needing to be here. We don't know what goes on inside a person, be they members who attend regularly or strangers who happen to show up. We are simply to welcome one and all.

We all know that the church is more than the "bricks and mortar" out of which a building is fashioned. The church is the people. And indeed it is. But the church is more than even the people, is it not? Doesn't the church have to do with the spiritual life of the people. Doesn't the church have something to do with our relationship with God? Isn't the church that place, that body of believers that cultivates, perhaps over a lifetime, that relationship with God, encouraging us to explore, ask questions, find solace at different times in our lives? Recently someone told me that they would not be in worship for awhile as they were discouraged and had to work through some painful issues. While I understood, I also thought that it was too bad because isn't this precisely the place that we are free to confront God with whatever questions, issues, crises that we must confront?

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God” (Psalm 84:1-2). The psalm is one which sees the temple in Jerusalem not only as the dwelling place of God, but also as the gathering place of the faithful. There is nothing but good there. Even the sparrow has a place there. It is a place of worship. It is a place of respite. It is a place of safety. It is a place of prayer. A day there is better than a thousand anywhere else, the psalmist says. In short, for the psalmist the temple is home, that place where one is free to be oneself without fears or anxieties, where one is clear about oneself and about one’s relationship with this God who is, as we read in another psalm, “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” That place might be a glorious Gothic cathedral which reflects the majesty and glory of God and, by comparison, the smallness of human beings, or it might be a one-room church house out in the country in mid-America.

But whichever it is and as much as we may admire, love, and feel at home in the place of worship, eventually we must leave. But in leaving, we know we take that home with us. Or, to put it another way, God is not limited to any temple, cathedral, or simple church building, but always goes before us. This place and everything that goes with it shapes who we are and what we believe and how we live.

Last Sunday I read that one of the more articulate spokespersons and activists in the civil rights movement, Julian Bond, died. We included his name in our pastoral prayers. Well, this past week I learned of another person who was described as a “forgotten hero of the civil rights movement.” I want to share this with you because I

happen to think that the issue of race in this country is one of the most persistent issues that has plagued this country and gone unresolved.

Jonathan Daniels was a white male, born in March 1939 in Keene, New Hampshire. He had deep roots in New England. In many ways he was typical: he went to music camp, attended church, fell in love, and enjoyed a circle of close friends. He was by no means perfect. He was known to smoke, stay out late, and sneak an occasional beer. But Jonathan had a serious and thoughtful side to him. After high school he attended the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia where he thrived under the rigorous academic and physical discipline. Not knowing what he wanted to do after he graduated, he decided to go to Harvard and pursue a graduate degree in English. After a year, he decided that that was not for him.

And then he had an epiphany. He never shared what he experienced during the 1962 Easter Sunday services at the Church of the Advent on Beacon Hill, but it changed his life forever. He later called it a “reconversion”; after an on again off again relationship with the church, he had come home (there’s that word again). Within a year he was enrolled in seminary at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In March 1965 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called on American clergy for assistance after the brutal attack on activists at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. At first Jonathan was not sure -- “could I spare the time? Did I want to spare the time? Did He (God) want...?” But after evening chapel he resolved to go south. He joined the march to Montgomery and then, after most of the activists had returned home and the camera crews had packed up, he stayed.

While managing to complete his seminary coursework, he plunged into what he called “living theology”: he helped with voter registration, photographed segregated conditions, worked to integrate a church, and lived with local families, usually black families. He also encountered less than friendly locals. On one occasion, he was accused of being an “outside agitator” and asked if he was a “white nigger.” He replied that he was.

On August 14, 1965 Jonathan was part of a protest in Fort Deposit, Alabama. He and twenty others were arrested and held in the Hayneville County Jail where he sat for a week in the sweltering heat. They were released on August 20 and quickly tried to get to a safe place. While some of the activists organized rides, Jonathan and a Catholic priest named Richard Morrisroe, along with two local women, Ruby Sales and Joyce Bailey, walked to a local store known to serve blacks and whites.

As Ruby opened the door, a figure from the shadow warned them off the property. Then the man raised a shotgun and pulled the trigger. Jonathan pulled Ruby from the line of fire and was hit instead. He was dead before he hit the ground. The gunman shot Father Morrisroe in the back, and then walked over to the county courthouse to call the state police chief and inform him he had just shot two preachers.

At Jonathan’s funeral, many of the mourners stood around the grave and sang the anthem of the movement, “We Shall Overcome” -- a final tribute from those who had come to love this son of New England and his integrity, love, and commitment to freedom.

Mike Bell, who told this story, asked why Jonathan's story is so seldom told. He concluded that whenever his story is told, Jonathan's witness to peace and justice is shared. Bell goes on to say that Jonathan "is still part of the lives he touched and in the life that he graciously saved. Wherever a person stands up with love and compassion and takes a stand against violence and hatred, Jonathan Daniels is still alive."

I tell you this story, in part, to share a powerful tale about a person of whom very few of us have heard. But I also tell this story because it was in an Easter worship service that Jonathan Daniels underwent a "reconversion" and he discovered that he had come home.

For, you see, home is not simply where we feel comfortable, accepted, forgiven, and free to explore and ask questions in faith and of the faith. Home is also being able to live out our faith and convictions, even -- or perhaps especially -- when we have questions. Home is trusting that the God we worship and to whom we pray and to whom we express our innermost thoughts, doubts, questions, uncertainties is the same God who goes with us and even goes before us as we step out in faith, doing what we think, hope, and believe is right.

Home is being willing to risk ourselves for a cause we believe to be right and consistent with God's will. Ultimately, home is putting our lives in God's hands and trusting, in the words of Julian of Norwich, that in the end all will be well.

"Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be in Zion" (Psalm 84:5-7).

We gather here not because we have to nor out of any sense of guilt. We gather here because this is home. This is where we are safe. This is where we are nurtured. This is where we grow spiritually. This is where we learn to know God and discover God's love for and grace towards us. This is where we discover community, working side by side with other believers, seekers, doubters. This is where we learn and practice the gospel.

But, like Jonathan Daniels, we also must leave this place. We don't leave it behind. Rather, we take it with us as we make our own witness to the good news of God's love, mercy, and justice.

Thanks be to God!