



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Where Prayer Has Been Valid

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 23, 2015

Readings: 1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 41-43; John 6:56-69

Sermon text: "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" 1 Kings 8:41

There were kneeling cushions set on the asphalt parking apron in front of the remodeled "Varner's Cash Store" where Jonathan Daniels was shot to death fifty years ago last week. After a reading and short prayer, participants in the march were invited to kneel and offer their own prayer. I did. Doug Fisher knelt beside me. There were others. The total crowd numbered in the hundreds. There were twenty or so purple shirts—bishops—and others carrying large placards with the pictures of the eleven Alabama martyrs for civil rights, killed from 1947 to 1967, Jonathan Daniels among them. There were groups from Keene, New Hampshire, Daniel's hometown, from Episcopal Divinity School, his seminary, Virginia Military Institute, where he was valedictorian. There was a large group from the diocese of Alabama, and from the diocese of New York—47 people young and old, among whom were the ten of us who had driven down in the Grace Church van.

We were all there under the hot sun, remembering that similarly hot summer day when Daniels and a young Catholic priest, Richard Morrisoe, were released from the county jail in Hayneville, along with others among the 20 or so who had been arrested for attempting to register black voters. Daniels, Morrisoe, and two teenage black girls walked to Varner's from the jail down the street, where they been kept for six days and nights in squalid conditions, without proper toilets, decent food, any showers. They came to the store for a cold drink. They were met by deputy sheriff Tom Coleman, who came out of the door of that store with a double barrel shotgun aimed at the young black girl Ruby Sales. Get away from here, he said, and pointed the gun. Daniels stepped forward and pulled Ruby aside. He took the full force of the blast in his chest and died immediately. The others turned to run. Morrisoe took the second barrel in his back. He would survive after long hours of surgery. Coleman claimed he acted in self-defense and was acquitted of all charges by an all-white jury.

continued on next page

T.S. Eliot wrote this after kneeling to pray at Little Gidding:

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same; you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity,
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

Kneeling at the site of Daniels' death brought home a connection within Eliot's poem I hadn't understood before. For after the passage I just read, the poem goes on to talk about prayer as "more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying." Prayer is connected to what the dead have to say—which they couldn't say when living—but now speak "tongued with fire" at the intersection of time and eternity.

What was Daniels, what were all the martyrs of Alabama, all the martyrs of the long struggle for freedom and dignity for African Americans trying to tell me as I knelt down to pray?

I think I heard at least this, get back on your feet and keep marching. There's a long way yet to go to the promised land.

You may hear an echo here not only of Exodus but of the "[Mountaintop](#)" speech Martin King made in Memphis, Tennessee. "Like anybody," he said, "I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory." He was killed the next day, April 4, 1968.

Early morning, April four
Shot rings out in the Memphis sky
Free at last, they took your life
They could not take your pride
In the name of love
What more in the name of love
In the name of love
What more in the name of love
U2, "Pride (n the Name of Love)"

Our small group had visited the MLK Memorial on the National Mall in Washington D.C. Each of us chose a passage to memorize from among the many memorable quotes cut into the arcing granite slabs ringing the monument, a massive sculpture of Martin cut out and stepped forward from two flanking slabs: a stone of hope hewn from a mountain of despair. His face is set in a look of determination, even anger. And

white people are frightened by black people's anger. But King's righteous anger, which is God's anger at injustice, was wed to a core ethic of love, Christian love, and a deliberate strategy of nonviolence—straight from Jesus by way of Gandhi. It works. It remains the best path to the promised land.

The next day we drove to Atlanta where the rest of the diocesan group joined us. In addition to visiting the MLK memorial and museum we watched a wonderful documentary about the [Children's March](#) of Birmingham in 1963. Young people, skipping school to get arrested, following Martin Luther King where the older folks didn't dare to go. Showing the world an example of courage and perseverance that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Bill and which resonates to this day. Even Bull Connor and his fire hoses and attack dogs couldn't hold them back.

The next day we went to Birmingham and visited the 16th street Baptist Church, the site where the children gathered to march, and also the site of the church bombing in 1963 which killed four young girls and incited national outrage. The bombing had been a terrorist response to the success of the "Children's March."

The blood of the martyrs includes so many children.

I mentioned the line from Eliot's poem to Jonathan Shanks, who had been moved by this site and many others in our travels. "A place where prayer has been valid." A sacred place. A place where time and eternity come together. Not a vague misty spirituality, but stone and asphalt places. A place where God's name was called on to fortify the spirit of people about to walk out under a hot summer sun and face raw hatred and deadly violence.

Stone upon stone, building a temple. Do you think that is what Solomon was thinking about when he dedicated the great Temple he had built to house the ark of the covenant? He gave thanks to God for blessing the people and his own family—for putting the line of David on the throne of Israel. And he prayed for wisdom to lead and govern. And he asked, but will you, God, indeed dwell on earth? Heaven and earth cannot contain you. You are beyond all imaging, all words, all places. yet we feel your presence here. Here prayer is valid—even the prayer of the foreigner, the sojourner, the refugee, the immigrant, the outcast and the prisoner. Here, where the presence of God truly dwells, shall be called a house of prayer for all people (Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13). Here, where the blood of martyrs has been spilled. Here, where the body of Christ was broken for us. Here, where the Risen One proved love is stronger than death.

Christ's death, as Paul wrote, broke down the barriers between tribes and peoples, male and female, slave and free. His death paid the debt and freed the prisoners—and his resurrection showed us the way forward. A way of truth without fear, love without hate, forgiveness and reconciliation through witness and repentance.

Stone upon stone, prayer upon prayer, sacrifice upon sacrifice. And don't you realize that we are also the living stones of the temple, as Paul reminds us? Do't you think God still dwells with us? Can't you feel the prayers of the generations in the very bricks of these walls, and in the cries of the children about to be baptized?

That is what the good news is all about. That by participating in God's life—through baptism and communion and prayer—we are empowered to go out into the world fired up with the spirit of courage and love. Prepared to give even our lives so that justice and peace might reign. That is what the martyrs have taught us. that is what the spirit of Jonathan Daniels was telling me as I knelt on the asphalt apron of ["Varner's Cash](#)

Store.”

Final note: Ruby Sales went on to become an Episcopal priest and the grandchildren of Tom Coleman are biracial. The truth is marching on.

In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY