

“Jesus Calls”

The most memorable part of today’s gospel reading is Jesus’ calling of the disciples. What has always struck me about this call narrative is the response of the fisherman brothers—Simon and Andrew, James and John. When addressed by Jesus, they drop what they are doing and follow immediately. Imagine a call to a new life so powerful that you would leave your family, community, and job to follow a guy you have never met. Imagine being a fisherman who was being called to “fish for people.” They might have wondered what it meant to fish for people, but they followed because the power and charisma of Jesus was irresistible.

Jesus’ call was not just irresistible in his day his call continues to be irresistible for many. There is one young man that you should know about who could not resist Jesus’ call. His name was Jonathan Myrick Daniels. Jonathan was born and raised in New Hampshire. He first heard a call in his teens, and it took him to the Episcopal Church. While he thought his call might be to ministry, when it was time for college, he chose to attend the Virginia Military Institute. He graduated as a valedictorian of his class in 1961. He then headed to Harvard to study English, but his call to ministry persisted. He left Harvard to go down the street to the Episcopal Theological Seminary in the fall of 1963.

In March of 1965, he and other seminarians responded to the call of Dr. King to join the Civil Rights marches in Alabama. He went for a weekend but felt called to come back for another two months. He returned to the seminary for exams in May. Then in July, he went back to Alabama to tutor African American children, desegregate public places, and help people apply for public assistance. Following the passage of the Voting Rights Act that summer, he helped African Americans register to vote.

A few days later, he joined a small group of protesters to picket “whites only” stores in Fort Deposit. They were arrested and transported by garbage truck to a jail in nearby Hayneville. Despite efforts to bail out various members of the group, the sheriff would not allow anyone to be bailed out unless all of them were. After six days, the group was released without warning. While one member of the group went to call for transportation, the rest waited outside the courthouse. During the wait, four of the group crossed the street to a store that would serve black people to get soft drinks. The group included a Catholic priest, Jonathan Daniels, and two young black activists.

As they approached the store, they saw their way was blocked by a recently deputized construction worker. He pointed his shotgun at the group and fired. He was aiming for seventeen-year-old Ruby Sales. But Daniels reacted quickly, pushing her out of the way and absorbing the entire shotgun blast. He was killed instantly. The Catholic priest moved to shield the other black teen. He received a shotgun blast in his back. The killer was acquitted by

a jury of twelve white men, saying he was acting in self-defense even though the four he shot were unarmed.

Daniels was honored posthumously by Dr. King and others. He is one of two Americans that the Episcopal Church honors as a martyr, the other being Dr. King. The girl Daniels protected went on to seminary and is a human rights advocate in Washington, DC.

Jesus' call is not easy to resist. His call is life-changing. In some cases, as with Daniels and Dr. King, it may even mean that we forfeit our lives to answer the call. Is it worth it? Allow me to quote Dr. King's last speech, which he gave in Memphis the night before he was assassinated.

"I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, 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 mountaintop. 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 that Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'"

We don't have Jonathan Daniel's thoughts before he was murdered. We do not know the thoughts of many who died after answering God's call. But I think that Jonathan and so many others would echo Dr. King's words. When God calls, there is the opportunity to go to the mountaintop and see the Promised Land. It is a vision that is beyond compare with anything the world offers.

If we accept God's call, the material world will fight back. It will tempt us, it will abuse us, and it will do all in its power to take from us the hope of that vision. Do not let it. Be like the disciples, Mary, Martha, Jonathan, Martin, Teresa, Francis, and so many others who were called and followed and were nourished by the glory of the coming of the Lord and the vision of the Promised Land.