

Homily for the Jonathan Daniel Pilgrimage
Lowndes County, Alabama
August 10, 2013
by
Gloria House, SNCC Field Secretary in Lowndes, 1965-67

Good afternoon, Everyone. I would like to express my gratitude to the planners of this year's pilgrimage for inviting me – especially to Claire Milligan, who first approached me about coming for this event a couple of years ago. Thank you to everyone. And I would like to acknowledge Ruby Sales, who is an integral part of this pilgrimage, as well as the presence of my SNCC sisters, Joann Mants and Gwen Patton, and other friends from the Lowndes County and Selma communities. And, of course, I acknowledge Jonathan. I remember him as a man of extraordinary warmth, clarity of mission, and commitment to justice. His spirit is certainly here with us today.

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.
Amen*

When I was a graduate student at UC Berkeley in the 60's, contemplating joining the southern movement, in the evenings after my seminars, I would stop at the news kiosk near campus to browse for updates on world events and developments in the civil rights fight. One evening, I was stunned by a news photo of Mississippi law officials in the process of removing the bodies of three civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Mickey Schwerner, from a dam. Members of the Ku Klux Klan had captured and murdered these young freedom workers, and buried their bodies in the dam. As I stood there on the corner of Telegraph Avenue frozen by the horror in the photo, the importance of my graduate studies in Comparative Literature paled significantly. Obsessed by that photo, I went to my Ashby street apartment and wrote this poem:

Meridian, Miss., August 1964

Disintegrating bodies in black bags
Disdain the plump fingers,
the sags of over-fed stomachs,
prudent police in burnished holsters-

Doing their unpleasant duty
sheepishly
beneath the American flag.

Fourteen or fifteen years ago,
Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman
Sat tennis-shoed and tee shirted
learning how "Our Forefathers" founded this land
for freedom's sake!

And they believed.
Have left us now, bereaved

weeping over our John Donne and George Herbert and T.S. Eliot
weeping
weeping.

Of course, there were other heartbreaking travesties in the nation, including the killing of the four little girls in the Birmingham church bombing of 1963. These atrocities marked the consciousness of those of us who came of age in the 1960's. I had to go South. I didn't want to be an observer and simply read about the struggle. I wanted to lend my life to it. Similar feelings motivated hundreds of young people of my generation.

In 1965, I met a group of students from San Francisco State College who were conducting a book drive for freedom schools in the South. They were planning to go to Selma, Alabama to set up a freedom school during the summer break. I happily joined them.

That summer Selma was still a center of civil rights activity. Movement culture was thriving: Voter registration work was ongoing, attendance at mass meetings in Brown Chapel was high, the children were bright, spunky muses of revolution, and the church-rocking music of the freedom songs was breathtaking! The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) both had state headquarters in Selma. SNCC had begun organizing independent political parties with sharecroppers in several Alabama counties.

On the night of my arrival in Selma, I attended a civil rights rally in Brown Chapel, where I met Stokely Carmichael, the SNCC project director in Lowndes County. At Stokely's invitation, I visited Lowndes County, made a tour with him of the families involved and started to attend the weekly mass meetings held in the rural churches around the county. Stokely had also introduced Jonathan to the Lowndes County community. Through Stokely, I became friends with Jonathan and Alice and Lonzie West, Selma movement activists who had sheltered many other civil rights workers and that summer had offered Jonathan a room in their project home near Brown Chapel.

When Jonathan learned that I had recently become a member of the Episcopal Church, he asked me to accompany him and a group of local children to St. Paul's, the segregated Episcopal Church in Selma. Rev. Frank Matthews, the rector, and the parishioners were hostile to us on several Sunday mornings – especially when we *presumed* to approach the altar to take communion. I believe their rejection caused Jon a good deal of pain.

By the end of the summer, I had become a part of the Lowndes County SNCC group and was jailed in Hayneville, the county seat, for picketing businesses in Fort Deposit to demand respectful treatment and hiring of African Americans. Approximately twenty-five demonstrators, including Jonathan, were arrested, some of them teenagers. We were herded onto a garbage truck and taken to the small Hayneville Jail, the men put in cells upstairs, the three women, Ruby Sales, Joyce Bailey, and myself, in a cell on the ground floor. Filthy water covered

the floor, the mattresses on the bunks were lice-ridden, and an overwhelming stench enveloped everything.

We three women sang freedom songs so loudly that the men upstairs heard us and joined in. In this way, we passed the time in a fairly good frame of mind while we waited for the SNCC staff to raise our bail. Somehow we learned that a riot of unprecedented scale was occurring in Watts, California as we sat there in the Hayneville Jail. At the end of the week, a guard came, opened our cell, and informed us that we were being released on our own recognizance. We hadn't had word from the SNCC office in Selma and didn't believe what we were being told. Leaving our cell, we women joined the men and youngsters in the lobby, but hesitated to leave the jail, suspecting that there might be foul play. The guards then forced us out at gunpoint, off the county property, and out onto the road.

Our group walked about half a block to the main street of Hayneville and turned toward a little store a few feet away. As we approached, we heard gunfire. We were horrified to think we were being fired upon. The youngsters, who knew the area, scattered quickly, seeking shelter. We older activists hit the pavement where we had been standing, not knowing what else to do. On the store property, Jonathan had been shot immediately, murdered before our very eyes. We were terrified, thinking we would all be killed. The only other white member of our group, Father Morrisroe, a Catholic priest from Chicago, was shot in the back, and lay on the pavement moaning, unable to move. As there was no more gunfire, we started running up and down the street, pounding on the doors, begging for someone to call an ambulance. No one in that white community would respond. Eventually Stokely and others from the SNCC office came to pick us up and an ambulance came for Father Morrisroe. He had been wounded so badly that his surgery extended over 11 hours (Eagles 180), and years of physical therapy were required before he was able to walk again. Tom L. Coleman, the gunman, member of a prominent Alabama family, was one of several "special deputies" in Lowndes County.

When I recall the manner in which we were forced from the jail property and prevented from notifying the SNCC office that we had been released, when I consider the many ways in which we were set up for assault by the law enforcement agents, I am convinced that the white community of Lowndes had been alerted to Coleman's plan and collaborated in silence because they viewed Whites like Jonathan and Father Morrisroe as threats to their illusions of superiority and the very real privileges they derived from racism and segregation.

So many generations of Whites in Lowndes -- and throughout the South-- had built their lives on this base of degradation, economic deprivation and intimidation of African Americans. "Bloody Lowndes," as this county was called, was a landscape laden with centuries of racial hatred, violence, and heinous crimes against African Americans. Long after the eras of slavery and Reconstruction, Lowndes County Whites continued terrorist practices that author Douglas A. Blackmon has called "slavery by another name," where arbitrary arrests, peonage, imprisonment in work camps, and other forms of exploitation including starvation, mutilation and killing were norms. In many instances, the brutality exceeded that of chattel slavery, for in chattel slavery, the body of the enslaved had great value -- enabling labor and productivity and hence wealth. No slaveholder wanted to kill his slave property. Though African Americans were no longer property in the era of emerging industrial capitalism in Alabama, incarcerated workers were plentiful and readily available for the most dehumanizing work, with no limit to the degradation that might be inflicted. These brutally repressive practices ensured the comfort in

which Whites lived, while requiring African Americans to live in an “overwhelming fear of white violence” (Jeffries 1).

Tom Coleman, an heir to this legacy, desperately wanted to preserve it, to the extent that he was willing to commit murder. In national media interviews he said he felt no remorse and that given similar circumstances, he would respond in exactly the same way (Eagles 262). In support of Coleman’s crime, the community maintained its silence, the witnesses contrived a set of lies, and the jury exonerated him. And a fact that we mustn’t let fall through the cracks in the telling of Jonathan’s story is that it was not only Jonathan whom Coleman intended to kill, but also Father Morrisroe. This was so obviously the case, as we were *all – all of us SNCC workers-* - within easy range there on that Hayneville road, and Coleman was a skilled gunman. “ I just shot two preachers,” he is reputed to have said as he turned himself in (Mendelsohn 210). He meant two *white* preachers. Though I am certain that Jonathan, given his righteous, unselfish spirit, wished to protect Ruby Sales, who was next to him entering the store, I believe Coleman intended there to be two deaths only, – of the *white* members of our little group --to send an intimidating message to other Whites who might be called by the spirit of justice to join the side of the oppressed, as Jonathan and Father Morrisroe had done.

The presence of white activists in the freedom movement challenged the legacy of the racist South, challenged the very identity of Southern Whites. *Who* were Whites -- or Euro-Americans -- if not the superiors of African Americans? That assumed superiority provided the existential glue, the core belief on which their very lives and self-esteem depended. Fear of loss of this illusionary identity drove Tom Coleman to murder. But he wasn’t alone. He acted with the full support of his community, as they were all suffering from the same fear: that their identity in the world might be irretrievably lost if society should deconstruct the mythology of white superiority.

This fear of a transformed society, in which everyone might have equal access to essential life resources, led racist Whites to inflict a reign of terror for centuries, and to escalate that violence in the 1960’s when they felt the freedom movement threatened to bring their way of life to an end. In the few miles that circumscribed our daily work as movement organizers in Alabama, we passed one site of *martyrdom* after another: Here, on U.S Route 80 in Lowndes County, Mrs. Viola Luizzo had been murdered by Klansmen (3/25/65); on the sidewalk outside the Selma restaurant where we met frequently, 38-year old Rev. James Reeb from Boston was beaten to death by white segregationists (3/11/65); in Marion, Ala, young Jimmie Lee Jackson had been murdered by State Troopers (2/18/65); in August of the same year, Jonathan and Father Richard Morrisroe were gunned down at close range, Jonathan fatally wounded. In the following year, young college student Sammy Younge was killed at the gas station we frequented in Tuskegee. Add to these murders, the relentless beatings, church burnings, drive-by shootings, unwarranted arrests, and other forms of harassment that characterized whites’ response to the freedom struggle. This is the terrain into which Jonathan brought his passion for justice. It was a war zone, and he was aware his life was in constant danger, as he had been fired upon previously as he drove through Lowndes.

In retracing the path of Jonathan’s martyrdom as we have today, what can we derive of useful value to our daily lives in 2013? What inspiration for our continued work will we take home from this gathering?

A life, like Jonathan's, of engagement in the political and social movements to change a society, to render that society more inclusive, more responsive to the highest human aspirations of understanding and love reflects a profound choice. It is a commitment that uproots an individual from what might have been his life path -- perhaps a path of relative ease, social acceptance, wealth or what we commonly think of as success. *It is a step across the line of social status quo into a challenging and uncharted terrain.* Having taken that step, one may be viewed as a troublemaker, a tiresome pest who will not let things be, who will not behave, who appears to prefer rabble rousing to the protocols of polite indifference or neutrality.

Certainly Jonathan was seen in this light by Whites in Selma and Lowndes County. Certainly Jonathan was thought of in this way by the parishioners and Rev. Matthews at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Rev. Matthews is reputed to have said that Jonathan "embarrassed" him with his efforts to integrate the church and engage members on the issue of race (Mendelsohn 218), and Selma Sheriff Jim Clark berated Jonathan in this manner: "You are here to cause trouble; that's what you're doing. You don't live here. You are an agitator, and that's the lowest form of humanity" (Eagles, ix).

However, Jonathan was guided by the Holy Spirit and the principle of justice. He could not remain detached from the freedom movement. He felt deeply today's slogan, "no justice, no peace." No peace *inside* of him if he stood on the sidelines; no willingness to rationalize remaining an observer only.

Forty-eight years have passed since our stay in the Hayneville Jail, the horror of Jonathan's death and the ruthless wounding of Father Morrisroe on a curiously deserted main road in Hayneville. Will we permit ourselves to recognize how the ideology and practices of white supremacy that killed Jonathan continue to poison our society in 2013? Will we permit ourselves to hear the moans of Trayvon Martin's mother, or Jordan Davis's mother as they buried their sons, two of the latest of hundreds of martyrs? Can we recognize the extreme actions of the far right in our country as representative of the same fear that motivated Tom Coleman? Can we understand the abominable incarceration rate of African Americans and other people of color as an expression of this same unwillingness to concede the human rights of all individuals, no matter their race? Can we see the Republican Party's deliberate gridlocking of Congress to undo a president while ignoring the people's needs as inspired by the same fear of a new, more just political dispensation?

Can we find courage like Jonathan's to add our voices to the outcry against these injustices, even though we may be seen as those "troublemakers, those tiresome pests?" Can we work daily to insist upon the necessary government interventions? Can we challenge our brothers and sisters to examine their hearts and root out the vestiges of an old unjust culture, as President Obama suggested recently? *

We learned first-hand in the Southern movement that we may indeed be transformed, may rid ourselves of destructive ways of thinking and behavior in interaction with others who are engaged in the effort to change a repressive system. Our faith in God confirms this capacity for personal and collective transformation. Let's honor Jonathan's sacrifice by joining with him and others on the side of the struggle to achieve our highest human aspirations, in the campaign to create a new society, unfettered by racist fear and the silent collusion of the privileged.

May the Lord add a blessing to the offering of these words. Amen

*"...at least you can ask yourself your own questions about am I wringing as much bias out of myself as I can? Am I judging people, as much as I can, based not on the color of their skin, but the content of their character? That would, I think, be an appropriate exercise in the wake of this tragedy." President Barack Obama, concerning Trayvon Martin killing, Friday, July 19, 2013.

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

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