

A Sermon by The Rev. Anthony Jones, Deacon
St. John's Episcopal Church – Huntington, New York
August 20, 2017

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 15

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalm 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:10-28

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

(Sung by the Preacher)

Oh freedom,

Oh freedom,

Oh freedom over me.

And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave,

And go home to my lord and be free.

I've seen pictures and images this past week of things I never dreamed I would see happen in my lifetime. I was shocked when I got home last Sunday and began to see and hear all that had happened the day before. I never thought I would see the kind of things that I saw reported from Charlottesville, Virginia – the ugliness and bitterness of racism and hate. The violence and words that were yelled were disturbing.

I was born in 1970; just two years after Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed, just after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. So, for me, it is not a part of the memory from my generation. Because I did not witness it and I have no memory of it, it seems far removed from me in history – so far back in history that something like that could never happen in my lifetime. I suspect that those my age and younger feel the same way about it. I thought that, as a nation, we had move far beyond the ugliness of racism and the violence that goes with it. The images from Charlottesville were things that I had only seen pictures of or read about. It was shocking.

As I scrolled through Facebook this week, I saw something you probably didn't see. What the news did not show was St. Paul's Memorial Episcopal Church in Charlottesville on Saturday. Filled with people. Standing room only. Boldly singing the spiritual I just sung. People of all ages, races, and faiths gathered to pray, to sing, and to seek God at the same time displays of racism, hatred, and violence went on just outside. In the house of God, people were praying for and singing for peace and change and freedom.

Imagine my surprise when I picked up the scriptures this week to read the lessons that were appointed for this Sunday. I started with the Psalm and read the first verse – "Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live together in unity!" Could God be speaking directly to us

in this scripture, in this time? How direct that Psalm seemed to be. I had to put my Bible down after that one verse and sit with that for a moment.

Then, imagine my surprise when I moved to the Gospel and found Jesus saying, “Do you not know? It is not what goes into a person that defiles. It’s what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” It’s those words and actions, things we say and do that defile. That’s what contaminates, pollutes, and makes unclean. Jesus says, “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart” meaning, comes from within.

Those words that were shouted in Charlottesville and those violent acts defiled. But haven’t we moved beyond that? I thought.

As I pondered all this, I remembered the first time I came face to face with outright racism. I had just graduated from high school and was ready to start college when I began working at a large downtown bank, a bank headquartered here in New York. It was a bank large enough to have an employee cafeteria. I worked in the proof department. (I’m not sure if that job even still exists in today’s banking world.) I worked in this small department with nine women who were all different from me. It was the kind of job where we all took lunch at the same time. So, every day we would go the cafeteria and eat lunch together. We ate a late lunch most days so that the woman who cooked could come out of the kitchen to sit and eat with us.

One day, a vice-president from a different department passed by our table and tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Can I speak with you a moment?” I got up from the table and we stepped off to the side. There he said something like, “You’re doing good here and we like you, but you should find a different table to eat at. You know, you should sit with different people.”

I went home that day and told my parents about that conversation. I realized what I was being told was: “Sit with your own kind.” “Those people are not good enough.” “Don’t be associated with them.”

So, we might think that we have moved past racism and bigotry in all its forms and that we have never seen what we saw in Charlottesville. But have we? I realize that conversation at the bank affected me. If it hadn’t, it would not be so etched in my memory and I would not be telling it almost 30 years later. The truth is, we have all been touched by and we have all been affected by racism.

Again, imagine my surprise this past Monday morning when I began to read about a man named Jonathan Daniels. Jonathan Daniels was a seminary student at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1965. (And here I am in seminary.) He wrote that one evening while praying the Magnificat – those verses that say, “My soul doth magnify the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” he reached that point where it says, “He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly” and he knew right then and there that he must go to Alabama and be part of the Civil Rights Movement. He knew in his heart what God had called him to do in that time and place.

He took a leave from his classes and went to Alabama to be with those working for civil rights. As things happened, he and some others were jailed. They were released without much incident and on August 14, 1965 walked to a store to buy some cold soft drinks. As they reached the entrance of the store, they were met by a man with a shotgun. The man pointed the gun at Ruby Sales, a 17-year-old African-American girl who was with the group. Jonathan Daniels pushed her out of the way and took the shot. Johnathan Daniels died. Ruby Sales went on to continue the fight for freedom.

Ruby Sales is still alive and continues the work. You can read about her on the internet – just Google “Ruby Sales” and you will find information about her and you can even listen to an interview with her.

I could not hear the story of Jonathan Daniels – in seminary studying to be a priest and responding to God’s call to ministry in the moment – and not think about what God is calling me to do here and now. What have I done and what am I doing?

I cannot hear the stories of the struggle for Civil Rights and not think about what God is calling us to do right here, right now. How will we at St. John’s respond to the times we live in? What is our response to Charlottesville? How do we take what we have within these four walls out into to the world and allow God to work a change?

You see, Jonathan Daniels got up from where he was and went to do what God called him to do. He did not say, “Wait, I haven’t had that class yet.” He didn’t say, “I can’t because I have not had that training yet.” He didn’t say, “But I don’t know what to do.”

We cannot let this moment pass by. We cannot say we are not ready or that we don’t know what to do. We are the Church and God has called us to openly live out our faith here and now. What will we do?

A classic study of moral theology would show that Greek thought developed the concept of virtues and vices. The Greek thinkers came up with seven categories of vices or sins and it is believed that all sin or wrong actions can be classified into one or more of these categories. You’ve probably heard of them – the Seven Deadly Sins – sometimes called cardinal sins. One of those categories is the sin of pride.

The scriptures tell us that our struggle or fight is not against flesh and blood. It is “against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against spiritual forces of wickedness...” (Ephesians 6:12). What it is saying is that our struggles are not really against what we can see, our struggle is against what we can’t see.

Think about it. You can see flesh. You can see the color or gender of another. But that is not the where the sin originates. The root of racism is pride. Racism and bigotry are the manifestations that we can see. But pride itself we cannot see.

Pride. We all have it. We've all engaged it. You see, it's easy to look and say, "Look what happened in Charlottesville." "I would never act like that or treat someone like that." "I am not like that." It's much harder to look within ourselves and see the sin of pride. It's much harder to say, "I have sinned." It's easier to say, "no way could I be part of that" than to say, "I have pride."

We've all been there. I have to put myself in check just thinking of something as simple as driving on the LIE when someone cuts me off to get in front of me. "How dare they? I'm leading this road race!" Or, you get to the check-out at the grocery store and see that the person in front of you has a basket full of items while you have just a couple. "Don't they know my time is valuable and I need to get out of here?" Or, you step onto the train or subway and see someone take the last seat that you were headed for. "Don't they know I deserve to sit?" It's all about ME. The sin of pride.

It's pride that leads us to treat others less than we were.

There is another category in that list of seven sins: the sin of sloth or of doing nothing. We might not have participated directly in racism or oppression. But I ask the question of you that I ask of myself – what have I done to stop it? What have I allowed God to do in me to rid me of pride?

Every one of us, every person here should be singing that spiritual – Freedom. Oh Freedom. Freedom over me. – because we are all sinners. We've all been there. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23).

We have all been slaves. We are captive and held in slavery when sin creeps into our lives. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." (Romans 8:15). Sin enslaves us and entraps us. When we are in sin, we become a slave to that sin.

We should be singing that spiritual – Oh Freedom. Oh Freedom over me – because spirituals always have more than one meaning. Yes, there is the longing in that spiritual for immediate freedom from oppression. And, there is that part at the end about being home with our Lord for eternity.

But there is that part of the song that says, "Before I'll be a slave..." which recalls being vigilant: vigilant against oppression and vigilant against sin right now. We are reminded in Hebrews how easily we can fall into sin. "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us..." (Hebrews 12:1). Before we know it, pride can take hold. Before we know it, we can sit back and do nothing and let the chance for action pass. Be vigilant to guard your heart and mind from sin.

“...I'll be buried in my grave.” And we've been there too. It's the waters of baptism – dying to the old self, raised to walk in new life, walking with our Lord, free.

Here is where the good news in all of this comes in....

We've been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in new life – we get a new life and we get a new spirit. Paul writes, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, Abba! Father!” That's good news! We did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear! – Freedom! Freedom over me! We don't have to be slaves to sin anymore! We have a spirit to call on God, Abba Father! We have been filled with the Spirit that can change and overcome.

So, what do we do in these times? Father Duncan and I have spent time talking about this. What is our response as Christians and what is our response as a Church?

For one thing, we can keep doing what we already do but do it even more. We can keep feeding the hungry and feed even more.

We can continue working with other faith communities and with the Huntington Interfaith Homeless Initiative.

We can keep fighting the opioid crisis – helping especially the young people in our community.

We can continue the dialogue and discussions we've already begun. We can be involved with our Racial Reconciliation Committee – being protective of this safe space that we have allowed to form. Some of us just need to tell our stories to begin the road to healing. Some of us need to hear the stories of others. We will have more opportunities for this in the days to come.

You see, I am convinced that God works one person at a time; one relationship at a time. God has given us everything we need to make a difference in the lives of those around us – a spirit, not of slavery to fall back into fear, but a spirit that can bring freedom – in your life, in your home, where you live, where you work, in your school, in the places where you shop and eat.

What an exciting time to be a witness to the world of Christ at work! We can't let it pass!

Where is God calling you? What are you being called to do? Where do you need to be involved? In what areas of life is God working change? How will we respond?

(Sung by the Preacher)

And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my lord and be free.