

“Then Peter began to speak to them: ‘I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’” Amen. Acts 10:34-35

Peter, a devout Jew, begins his witness to the resurrection of Jesus by assuring his new Gentile friends that God shows no partiality. Peter is learning through his own experience that at least one of the implications of resurrection is the transcendence of invidious racial distinctions that divide and disinherit the children of God. The resurrection of Jesus signifies God’s forgiveness reconciling all people with God and each other, without exception.

The catechism of the Episcopal Church teaches us that “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” (BCP, p. 855) To us has been entrusted Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. Like Peter, we are called to witness to an ever-expanding circle of resurrection life, new life, embracing all people and all things.

And so this glorious Easter morning, the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus touches upon one of the most difficult issues in the life of our nation – the issue of racial reconciliation. Like so many Americans; indeed, so many people around the world, I was captivated this week by Senator Barack Obama’s speech on race and politics in the United States. Quite apart from whatever influence it may have on his electoral prospects, I take his elegant speech, so filled with pathos and passion, to be an invitation to a renewed commitment to the unfinished work of the Civil Rights Movement.

God shows no partiality, but we do, we do. As Senator Obama cogently argued, the perfection of the union we share as a nation requires that we acknowledge the need for racial reconciliation in public life. This morning, I would like to suggest that a more perfect union requires something more: a more perfect resurrection. We need to set the issue of race and politics within the larger framework of Christ’s mission of reconciliation.

But what does it mean to perfect the resurrection? Wasn’t Jesus’ resurrection the perfect, complete, sign of God’s action to make whole what is broken? Yes and no. Recall that in John’s Gospel, on the eve of his death Jesus tells his disciples that “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will

do greater works than these.” (John 14:12) The resurrection of Jesus isn’t something that happened only to him, way back when. It is an ongoing, all-encompassing experience of new life in which all are invited to participate. The power and scope of the resurrection is being perfected in us, as we become united with Christ in his great work of reconciliation.

The work of reconciliation, the perfection of the resurrection, is not easy. It demands the best of us. It requires sacrifice, because reconciliation is the fruit of self-giving love. People do not become reconciled because they are intellectually persuaded to do so, or forcibly united, or enticed with rewards. The only way to become reconciled with another is to demonstrate to them the lengths to which you are willing to go to love them.

This truth is portrayed beautifully in Julie Scheers’ haunting memoir, *Jesus Land*, which chronicles her relationship with her African-American brother, David, who was adopted into her white family in rural Indiana. “In preschool,” Julie writes, “color became a problem. There were kids who didn’t like David because he was black and there were kids who didn’t like me because I was his sister. Others were just curious and asked stupid questions. ‘How’d you get that color?’ They’d ask. ‘If you scratch your skin, are you white underneath?’ I’d thrust myself between David and his interrogators. ‘He was born that way, dummy!’ I’d say. ‘If you scratch your skin are you black underneath?’

But their questions never ended. ‘Is your blood green?’ ‘How do people see you at night? Are you invisible?’ ‘Is your hair plastic?’ They regarded him as a fascinating freak, and David dutifully answered their questions, letting them poke and prod at him. But as we got older, their curiosity turned into rejection. Insults were hurled on the playground – ‘Jungle bunny,’ ‘Poo boy,’ ‘Velcro head.’ They called us the ‘Oreo Twins,’ and we were often left to play alone at recess. That was fine by us, because we were best friends anyway.”

This vignette from Julie and David Sheeres’ life together captures so much of the tragedy of racism – how early it is learned, how it distorts the perception and poisons the soul of those it affects, how nobly it is so often borne by those who bear the brunt of it; but it also expresses the basis of hope for reconciliation – the experience of solidarity across racial lines, the fierce passion to stand against injustice, the reality of a shared identity that is so much deeper than skin pigmentation.

Julie could have chosen to pretend that David wasn't her brother. She could have distanced herself, perhaps even joined in taunting him to fit in with their peers. She could have denied the common bond of their humanity, their being of one family. She chose instead to share in his suffering, to demonstrate the depths of her love and the unshakable reality of their unity. Together, she and David embodied a more perfect resurrection.

Julie and David illustrate what St. Paul meant when he wrote to his friends, "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." (Col. 1:24) Suffering that is chosen for the sake of love makes reconciliation possible. It is the path that leads to new life. The resurrection is perfected in us.

If racial reconciliation is one aspect of Christ's resurrection, demonstrating that God shows no partiality, then we should not be surprised that the route to resurrection lies through the way of the cross: "in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." That is precisely what the martyrs of the Civil Rights movement did on our behalf. They became Christ for us through their self-offering, so that we might enjoy a more perfect resurrection.

This coming Tuesday will mark the 43rd anniversary of the martyrdom of Viola Liuzzo, a wife and mother of three children who came down from Detroit to volunteer in the march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama in 1965. As she was driving from Montgomery to Selma, a carload of 4 Klansmen spotted her, a white woman, with a black male passenger, 19 year-old Leroy Moton. Liuzzo and Moton had been transporting marchers back home after the triumphant journey from Selma to the state capitol.

Enraged by this display of interracial cooperation, the Klansmen followed them into the darkness and rural isolation of Lowndes County, where they fired shotguns from their car, killing Liuzzo while she was still behind the wheel of a moving vehicle. Moton managed to steer the car to a stop on the shoulder of highway 80 and escape from the murderers. Taken back to Selma by another car of marchers who later drove by, Moton went to the police station, only to be arrested himself.

Moton was released and the four Klansmen were arrested by the F.B.I. within 24 hours – only because one of the four was a paid F.B.I. informant, who fired his own weapon at Liuzzo. Not only did the informant fail to intervene to prevent the murder; the F.B.I., knowing that the Klansmen were hunting for victims that night, failed to place the car under surveillance. The informant accepted witness protection in a cover-up of the F.B.I.'s mistakes, and the other three killers managed to escape with a hung jury and then acquittals in two state trials, before conviction on federal civil rights charges.

Between 1963 and 1966, Viola Liuzzo was one of thirteen martyrs who gave their lives to the cause of human freedom and dignity in Alabama alone. But their sacrifice was not in vain. Their witness inspired a non-violent revolution, pricked the conscience of a nation, and led to the passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965. That year, Lowndes County Alabama, where African-Americans constituted an overwhelming majority of the population, would see large numbers of black folks voting for the first time since Reconstruction.

Our Easter celebration is a call to become one with Christ in the work of reconciliation, the great work of bringing new life and new hope to a suffering world. God shows no partiality, and so this work must include an unstinting commitment to racial reconciliation. That work begins with our own vulnerability, our own honesty about our experiences of race. Like Julie Sheers, like Senator Obama, we must acknowledge that this issue is personal, deeply touching all of us.

That work also requires us to acknowledge the pain and promise of our common history, a history that encompasses both the KKK and the martyrs of Alabama. The legacy of white supremacy and the scars, resentments, and guilt that we bear are still very much with us. We must be willing to endure suffering, completing in our flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, for the sake of a more perfect resurrection beyond the cross of racism.

When we give ourselves to this great work of self-giving love we will experience the joy of the resurrection. "Joy," writes Gerald May, "is altogether beyond any consideration of pleasure or pain, and in fact requires a knowledge and acceptance of pain. Joy is the reaction one has to the full appreciation of Being. It is one's response to finding one's rightful, rooted place in life, and it can

happen only when one knows through and through that nothing is being denied or otherwise shut out of awareness." (*Will and Spirit*, p.16).

If we would know the joy of the resurrection, we can not deny our complicity in structural racism and our responsibility for racial reconciliation. Painful as it may be, when we are willing to bring it into awareness, we can also begin to accept the love and forgiveness of the God who shows no partiality, and gladly accept our part in the creation of a more perfect resurrection.

Amen.