

ALL WILL BE ONE
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Third Sunday of Easter
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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In case you hadn't heard, the National Basketball Association (NBA) had a "come to Jesus" moment this past Tuesday. You never know where the resurrected Jesus might show up. Jesus may be the Beloved, but love doesn't negate anger. Nor does love rest until the lost sheep has been brought home to the fold. For only then will all be one.

I'll get back to the NBA and that lost sheep but first the gospel for this third Sunday of Easter.

Luke 24:13-35

Two days after the crucifixion two of them were going to Emmaus, a village about seven miles from Jerusalem. As they walked along talking about all that had happened, Jesus himself came near and walked with them, but their eyes did not recognize him. To them he was but a stranger.

"What are you discussing?" he asked.

They stood still, dejected and looking sad.

"Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened?"

"What things?"

"The things about Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people. He was condemned to death and crucified. And to think we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel, which is to say, us our people.

Then Jesus said, "Oh, how slow of heart you are to believe all the prophets declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

[In others words, we might say, redemption, our own or the world's, doesn't come without suffering, without the vulnerability of love. Or as Frederick Douglass, the 19th century African-American abolitionist, put it: *If there is no struggle, there is no progress.*]

And so beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near their village, he kept walking on ahead. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Please, abide with us. It is almost evening and the day is nearly over." So he went in to abide with them.

That evening when they were at the table, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

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And this from New Testament scholar N. T. Wright.

Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about.

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One week ago today Americans by the millions rose up in righteous anger to judge and condemn the owner of the LA Clippers as a vile racist. By Monday it appeared the NBA was on the verge of losing lots of respectability and money. Players and fans spoke with one voice. Players would not play and fans would not show up unless that vile man was punished. Sponsors quickly disaffiliated from the team.

And thus it was that at two o'clock Tuesday afternoon the commissioner of the NBA—with the full backing of players and nearly every one of the 29 other owners—judged, condemned, punished and banished that errant owner for life. And just like that the mood across America turned. One voice after another declared: *Today is a great day for America.*

I was one of many who couldn't wait to see how the players and fans would respond that evening. I stayed up late to see that historic moment live.

At last the moment arrived. The players jogged onto the floor of the Staples Center in LA while fans stood as one to applaud them *and a stunning moral victory for the NBA, its players, its fans, and by extension the USA.* The arena was bedecked with signs declaring: WE ARE ONE. A chill ran down my back and, surprisingly, tears moistened my eyes. It was a moment to behold. It was a moment to remember a dream.

Imagine all the people
living life in peace
You may say I'm a dreamer,
but I'm not the only one.
I hope someday
you'll join us,
and the world will live
as one.
(John Lennon)

It was a moment to dream again. For those of us who had been dejected, disillusioned and disheartened, Tuesday was a "Jesus moment." It was a moment of joy, a moment of recognition—the Holy One in our midst, a resurrection of sorts, a redemption from disaster.

WE ARE ONE.

That's a song of hope. And that's a vision of new possibilities. After all, we are most often fractured and factious.

But that evening in LA the voice of righteousness in our land was louder than the voice of wickedness. The NBA—along with millions of ordinary Americans—said with one voice: *racism has no place in our nation for we are one.*

Well, yes and no. Yes, we are one in more ways than one. But not completely so. For, you see, "we are one" is also a way of saying: *you are not.* The "we" in "we are one" may only include the righteous ones, namely, us inside and not you on the outside, especially that vile one way out there in the wilderness!

And that's why the celebration Tuesday night eventually troubled me. I began to suspect something else going on unconsciously behind the jubilation. It's something we often see but don't always recognize. Tuesday night an old mythic ritual was at play.

In that cathartic moment many hypocrites suddenly felt pretty good about themselves. Millions of Americans who harbor racist attitudes toward people of color—but have never been caught saying so out loud—were breathing a sign of relief and reveling in redemption. Alas, a "scapegoat" had been found and banished to the wilderness, carrying away our collective sins of racism just as ancient Israel found relief every year

by placing their collective sins on the head of one unfortunate goat that was then driven out into the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts. You can hear echoes of that ritual in our tradition's naming Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

If only it were that easy.

But it's not.

As the beloved and wise former NBA player Charles Barkley put it: *it will take more than the banishment of one NBA owner to banish racism from the heart and soul of our nation and its institutions*—and I would add: that includes our own hearts and souls, and the institutions we serve, including the church. I must admit and confess that despite my best efforts over a lifetime racism still lurks in my own heart.

Redemption is not quick and easy.

No struggle, no progress. No suffering, no glory.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today and to those two disheartened and disillusioned disciples trudging back to Emmaus. *And, to think, we had thought Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel.*

As it turns out, no one person—not even Messiah—no one person, no one singular act can redeem us once and for all. We ourselves must participate in the process of redemption.

We must participate in the prayerful process of remorse, repentance, transformation and making amends, which is to say, living whole and holy lives, which often entails suffering of some sort. But whenever we take the first step, you can count on this: the Beloved is present, walking and working with us, repairing and redeeming our damaged and wounded hearts—sometimes in the simple act of breaking bread together.

You never know where the Resurrected One might show up.

As far as I can tell, the Resurrection of Jesus never convinced a single skeptic. But I do know this: the Resurrection continually inspires those who already believe—including those who want so badly to believe but somehow just can't quite get there. The Resurrection is for those who believe or want to believe that love is stronger than hate, hope stronger than despair, and forgiveness stronger than condemnation.

In case you hadn't heard, we are called to that way of living. We are called to live that way even when it seems near impossible.

Nothing worth doing
can be achieved in our lifetime;
therefore, we must be saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good
makes complete sense
in any immediate context of history;
therefore, we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous,
can be accomplished alone;
therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous
from the standpoint of our friend or foe

as it is from our own standpoint;
therefore, we must be saved
by the final form of love,
which is forgiveness

(Reinhold Niebuhr)