

Burned in solidarity

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Last summer, Charles Moore, a retired Methodist minister, nearly 80 years old, parked in a strip mall in his hometown of Grand Saline, Texas, pulled out a gas can from his trunk, drenched his clothes with gasoline, knelt down, and lit a match. He died in flames.

There was a note in his car. “America (and Grand Saline prominently) have never really repented for the atrocities of slavery and its aftermath,” Moore laments. “What my hometown needs to do is open its heart and its doors to black people, as a sign of the rejection of past sins.” His act was a call to repentance.

“Many African Americans were lynched around here,” he explains in the note,

hanged, decapitated and burned, some while still alive. The vision of them haunts me greatly. So, at this late date, I have decided to join them by giving my body to be burned, with love in my heart not only for them but also for the perpetrators of such horror—but especially for the citizens of Grand Saline, many of whom have been very kind to me and others who may be moved to change the situation here.

Moore’s family discovered another note at home. In it he reflects on his decision to give his body to be burned, in solidarity with the victims of racist America. “I have struggled all my life (especially the last several years) with what it means to take Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s insistence that Christ calls a person to come and die seriously,” Moore wrote. “He was not advocating self-immolation, but others have found this to be the necessary deed, as I have myself for some time now: it has been a long Gethsemane.”

The United States has been a long Gethsemane for African Americans. Charles Moore gave his life to remind us of the horror of what has been done to black lives—the horror of racist America. His life and death is a call to repentance. “Repent therefore,” says this week’s reading from Acts, “and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

“The human being is called upon to share in God’s suffering at the hands of a godless world,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell, “not to try to cover up or transfigure its godlessness.” There, in the parking lot of a Texas strip mall, Moore reminded his community of what they have tried to cover up—the horror of a godless world, a world of suffering created by the legacy of slavery, a society that still bears the marks of its racist past.

Repentance involves “sharing in God’s suffering in the worldly life. That’s *metanoia*,” Bonhoeffer declared, “allowing oneself to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks.”

Moore was pulled down that path, pulled by the spirits of the lynched and burned, the crucified and immolated. “The vision of them haunts me greatly,” he revealed. As a kid, he grew up with stories of midnight crucifixions, of immolations and beheadings—white leaders in his community terrorizing black residents. “A section of Grande Saline was (maybe still is) called ‘pole town,’” Moore explained, “where the heads were displayed.” To grow up there was to be haunted by the spirits of the past, haunted by visions of decapitated corpses and heads impaled atop poles. Moore was with them, the ghosts of the dead, as he walked through Gethsemane and bowed down in the parking lot—Golgotha in Pole Town. “I have decided to join them by giving my body to be burned.” Solidarity through immolation.

Easter doesn’t inaugurate the end of crucifixions. Easter doesn’t forget what happened on Good Friday. No, instead, the resurrection of the lynched Christ reveals our complicity in the horror of violence and beckons us into a penitent life, into a posture of repentance. Resurrection empowers us to confront and confess the dominion of sin in us, in our society—and to seek restitution, to make reparations, to find new life in restored relationships, to experience a forgiven life. Resurrection infuses our lives with the memory of the dead, the dead who will return from the grave—spirits who guide our lives, who inspire us to refuse social patterns of violence and to protest the enduring legacy of racism.

“I would much rather prefer to go on living and enjoy my beloved wife and grandchildren and others,” Rev. Moore wrote, “but I have come to believe that only my self-immolation will get the attention of anybody and perhaps inspire.”