

How to be better neighbors (Part 3)  
Brandon Pierce

In the last two bulletin articles I wrote, interspersed with a wonderful article by Dale last week, I attempted to distill a paper I had written for an academic audience on some destructive tendencies among white folks who want to be good friends and neighbors with the people of color in their midst. To recap a bit it might be helpful to think about the recent film *Get Out* which won the Oscar for ‘Best Original Screenplay’ last night. There are some light spoilers ahead so if you haven’t seen the movie and don’t want any of it spoiled, even slightly, then skip the next paragraph.

The film *Get Out* is about a young black man, Chris, who visits the home of his white girlfriend in their affluent, predominantly white suburb. It intentionally recalls the Sidney Poitier film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (at least I would argue that it does), except that the social backdrop has shifted. Instead of a cold reception and difficult adjustments on the part of the white family, Chris is welcomed enthusiastically. In the course of Chris’s introduction to the family and the town the white characters frequently make comments about race, emphasizing their enlightened open-mindedness and casting shame on the bigots and racists still among our broader culture—comments such as this titular line “I would have voted for Obama for a third term if I could!” As it turns out, however, there is a dark secret in this community where they have found a way to transfer their own consciousness into other bodies and the bodies they are interested are primarily black bodies. I don’t think I’ve exposed much more than the trailers have already so I’ll stop there.

The film is a narrative description of a more realistic problem in race relations. While pretentious open-mindedness is far better than cruel bigotry, there is an important sense in which this new liberal attitude about race is just an evolution of the same old games of white supremacy. When white folks use their apparent enlightened views about race as a way of garnering social currency they expose motives other than genuine love and respect for the people of color among them. And when that generosity of spirit towards people of color is tempered by constant deference to the sensibilities of white folk who are reticent about the changes that true equality demands, then they prove where their loyalties ultimately lie.

That is the essence of the problem. The second article I wrote explored some of the historical and intellectual backgrounds of the problem. In short, whether a person is able to think and act selflessly—especially in relation to issues of race—or whether they are more inclined to use their morality and limited selflessness as ways of further entrenching themselves among the powerful and privileged, has a lot to do, oddly, with how we understand history. Specifically, with whether we think we have advanced beyond Christ as a civilization or whether his life and teachings remain as the ultimate, guiding truth. If we think history has gone beyond Christ then we have license for ignoring the essence of Christ’s truth in self-emptying love (Phil 2:5-11). If not, then we must continue the hard work of learning to lose our lives in this world so that we might find our true lives in Christ.

Having spent a bit more space summarizing the past two articles than I intended, I want to spend the short remainder thinking a way in which we can learn to engage in genuine love and friendship with people whose skin tone (and thus social history) is different from our own.

The paper I wrote focused on the main aspect that I think is important, which is that the imitation of Christ, if done right, puts us at odds with the dominating forces of this world. Christ compels us to resist easy assimilation to the advantages and luxuries of this world. In that sense James Cone is right to identify Christ as someone who is in his essence on the side of the poor and the oppressed (this is what he means when he says that Jesus was “black”). Those of us in a modern, North American, frequently affluent and (still) predominantly Christian culture may find that call to suffering perplexing. But if we do not identify with the suffering Christ then we also do not identify with the suffering people of color around us. Christ is to be found there, in the midst of tax collectors and other pariahs, in the midst of the poor and marginalized of both 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine and 21<sup>st</sup> century North America.

The way out of exploitative open-mindedness for conscientious whites is to learn to suffer, to embrace the suffering you have experienced as something that helps connect you to Christ and the suffering ones in whom we see him most clearly. Some white folks today feel like they’re damned if they do and damned if they don’t in terms of race relations. They’ll be called bigots and racists (rightly so) if they continue to hang on to their prejudices, but they’ll be criticized all the same for trying to love their neighbors of color, however imperfectly. And that is kind of the point, because that is one of the many absurdities at the heart of the suffering of people of color in this nation for the last two centuries. Perhaps that experience itself will help us white folk better understand and relate to our friends and neighbors of color.