One of my first memories was of riding in the old, red wagon. It was a sunny summer day, like today. I was three or four years old. I thought we were going very fast. I didn’t worry about falling out of the wagon because, as usual, my big sister was sitting behind me, her arms wrapped around me. I was very happy.

As I recall, there were many wagon rides when we lived in the Longwood Apartments in Cleveland, Ohio. Our family moved to the Longwood Apartments when I was a year old. The apartments were two and three story, red brick, garden style apartments. The most important thing for me was that the apartment buildings were interspersed with lawns and playgrounds and connected with long winding sidewalks. And the sidewalks were great for riding in our wagon.

The wagon rides are the main thing I remember from the summer of 1964 or 1965, just me and my sister and our red, radio flyer wagon and a big boy named Tony. Tony lived in one of the apartments near ours. Tony was big, which probably meant he was seven or eight years old. Tony was big enough to pull me and my sister in our red wagon.

Like all of our neighbors, Tony was black. Tony was friendly, and he was careful. I trusted Tony, and we never crashed or fell out of the wagon.

This is the good, the easy part, of the story. I lived in the Longwood apartments and then, a few blocks away, on East 36th street in Cleveland, until I was 9 years old. All of the members of my family had light skin, but all of our neighbors were black and most of my friends were black. Thanks to my parents, at the age of three or four I began to understand that all people are children of God, created in the image of God, equal in the sight of God.

But there is a more difficult part of the story. It is a part of the story my parents understood many years before me. It is the primal story of race in America. In the story of race in America, people of color are sometimes dangerous, sometimes pitied, sometimes less able, sometimes treated like animals, and almost always not valued as equal in the sight of God. In the story of race in America, there is always an assumption that whiteness is good and normal, and often an assumption that blackness is not normal and is not good.

Here is my question: After my experience as a child, would I grow up as a person without racial bias? Was I certain to resist the primal story of race which surrounds us and permeates our culture?

The answer is no. No one is free from racial bias. No optimistic little boy is a match for the vicious, pervasive story of prejudice in America. The struggle to alter the story of race in America is not a short story. It is not a struggle that will be won by the most eloquent leader or by the most innocent little child. The struggle for equal rights and equal justice for all Americans, regardless of race and background, is not a battle that will be won with a few years of effort. The struggle to change the story of race in America has been a struggle for at least 20 generations of Americans, and will be a struggle for at least a few more generations.

This month we aware that the struggle against our primal narrative of violence, oppression, segregation and slavery based upon race is a struggle we face every day of our lives. We are struggling to change the way we tell the story. Some of the struggle is internal, and some of the struggle is external. It is easier to identify the external struggle, because you can see it and hear it.

The primal story of race reverberates in the words we use to tell stories every day. Listening to the news on Friday, I heard a journalist refer to the protests over the killing of black Americans as ‘riots’. This is a false description of the events. I have heard the protests described as riots several times in the past four weeks. Yet almost all of the protests have been peaceful and well-organized. We describe peaceful protests as dangerous and violent because stories about unruly, dangerous black people are part of the primal story about race in America.

The struggle against the primal story about race in America is also inside each one of us. It is more difficult to see the internal struggle because you don’t hear it or see it. It is a struggle about the feelings in
my hearts and the thoughts in my mind. If I pay attention, I notice that my feelings and my thoughts are shaped by that primal story about race.

Sometimes people just want the story to disappear. “Can’t we just stop talking about race?” The truth is that when we stop talking about race we assume everyone will just pretend they are white, and that the actual stories, experiences and culture of black Americans are not important. In the struggle for equal rights and equal justice for all Americans the first 400 years of the story will never disappear. In our lifetimes we are trying to write new chapters that tell a story of respect for the actual experience and the lives of black and brown people. We are trying to write chapters that tell a story of reconciliation and honesty. In our relationships with one another we are engaged in a continuous process of repairing the injury to our nation caused by the evil of racism. This work is not easy but those who do the work are engaged in a task of hope and goodness.

St. Paul is talking about a similar type of continuous process in the spiritual realm in his letter to the Romans. Our efforts in the spiritual realm are not easy but the spiritual journey described by Paul is a journey of hope and goodness. Paul’s letter to the Romans is a letter to Gentiles who are followers of Christ. Like many other people in many other times and places, the Christians in Rome seem to have the idea they will achieve mastery in the spiritual arena through their own efforts. Paul’s main point in the letter is that Gentile followers of Christ are grafted onto the tree of the faith of Abraham and that the faith of Abraham is a relationship of grace. In the first four chapters of Romans Paul depicts God’s covenant relationship with Abraham as a covenant of grace, as a covenant of God’s faithfulness.

In chapters 5-8 Paul describes the way Gentile followers of Christ can enter into this same covenant of grace. Here in chapter 6 Paul is in the middle of his explanation. Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? In the opening verses Paul references the sin filled life of the gentiles he described in chapter 1 of the letter. He also identifies the primary character of our journey with God; we must be willing to give up some part of our old lives.

Paul asks, How can we who died to sin go on living in it? In order to journey forward with God we must be willing to empty ourselves of the ways of sin. This process of self-emptying is a continuous process.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? This is not the way I would talk about baptism with young children, but it is a powerful way to talk about baptism and resurrection with adults. Baptism is a process where we make room for God to enter our lives by letting a part of ourselves be dead. This is a continuous process.

And it is a process ultimately, not of death but of resurrection. Therefore we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

In this process we continually let go of the possibility of violence, division and fear within ourselves, in order that we may continually live the resurrection life. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

This is the journey we are on. Like Sarah, Abraham and Hagar we are sometimes in great distress, but we are on a journey of living with God. We are on a journey of resurrection. In order for there to be resurrection, we have to be willing to let some part of life be dead. We are on a daily journey of examining what is in our hearts. We are on a continuous journey of letting go of the way of sin: violence, division, domination and fear. In this journey we walk daily with God. In this journey we constantly making space in our hearts and minds so God’s love may grow in us. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.