



My Sister Claretha

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

We pulled a U-Haul rental truck in front of the beautiful 2-story, Dutch-colonial house on tree-lined Giddings Avenue in Grand Rapids. August 10, 1978 marked a new beginning for me—my first teaching job after too-many years of college and grad school. Now a lovely home for \$40,000, costing less than we received in the sale of our much-inferior house we left behind.

It marked a major change in my life, not the least of which was living in a mostly African-American neighborhood. We waved at neighbors who appeared both curious and wary. Within weeks, however, our effort to be friendly was marred by an accusation of racism. Me, a racist? I had no reason to treat black people any different than I would treat whites.

But a little incident became a serious point of tension. Two young boys had climbed over our back-yard fence. I demanded to know what they were up to. They were over the fence in a heartbeat, and I hot on their trail. I was fast in those days, but no match for these two who were running for their lives. Unlike so many instances we hear about, this was not caught on a cell phone. But it was witnessed by Claretha, Jack and their three children. They were furious, and they let me know. I told them point blank that I would have chased white boys climbing over my fence as well. They didn't buy it.

I went back into my house stewing over the accusation. But as the minutes turned into hours, my conscience started talking. I wrote a letter to Claretha apologizing for my behavior, telling her I wanted to be friends. That moment was the real new beginning. For the next 28 years we bonded inside and outside each other's houses. When son Carlton acquired two VIP tickets for candidate Bill Clinton's visit, she joined me. We were right

up against the fence as he walked to the podium. He spotted Claretha and reached out to give her a hug.

Times of laughter and fun were balanced by serious reflection. One afternoon when I was raking, Jack was working in his own yard. As we chatted, I asked about his growing up in Mississippi. That's when he told me about the night of terror. He and his girlfriend were double dating, parked at a lonely spot along a river. Suddenly headlights beamed into their rear windows. A sheriff and deputy ordered them out of their vehicle, guns drawn. The boys forced to stand, arms outstretched, hands against the car while the girls were raped. "They called me *boy*," Jack recalled after all those years, "and I didn't do a thing to save those girls." The pain is still raw.

She was my sister and she wasn't about to be left out. Her very presence crowned our little wedding with tender mercies.

Fast forward two decades. I was teaching a seminary course that included a segment on racism. I opened the class by saying to my all-white students: *There is racism here in this room.* That jolted their early morning malaise. I paused, looking slowly at each student, and said, *I know there is racism in this room and in this seminary.* Another pause, and I said, *I know there is racism because I am here.* I told them about racing after those two boys in my back yard, and that I still had to be ever conscious of the insidious nature of racism in my own life.

Two young black boys in my back yard spurred the beginning of a friendship. That same back yard was the setting for my marriage to John in 2004—a very small family affair. Claretha, however, informed me she was coming. She was my sister and she wasn't about to be left out. I was honored. Her very presence crowned our little wedding with tender mercies. □

—Ruth Tucker