

“Reparations”

Luke 19:1-10

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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Reparations.

It’s an easy word to say.

It’s a harder word to embrace.

It has as its root the word repair.

The prophet Isaiah says that we are to be repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in. That word is certainly appropriate this week.

Reparations is a word of good news for those who have been oppressed and marginalized.

It’s a challenge for those who have generational wealth.

It points out an historical inequity that is older than the founding of this country. For whenever one race or class or army takes property or dignity or influence of another there is a lingering brokenness that needs to be addressed. We can get all in the weeds about how to make it happen. How do we compensate for the inequities? Where do we begin our search for reparations?

Do we start at the redlining of the twin cities that gave way to segregating neighborhoods and restricting wealth?

Do we start at the removal of the Rondo neighborhood so that I 94 could drive another wedge into the community?

Do we start with voting rights restrictions?

Do we start at the descendants of those who were lynched over the years?

How about the generations that are incarcerated by a biased judicial system?

Do we start at the 40 acres and a mule that were never delivered?

Do we start at the slave trade?

Do we start at the idea of manifest destiny that stole land away from the first inhabitants of Turtle Island?

Sometimes it seems so hard to know where to begin that we don’t begin at all.

In her book *Dear White Christians*, Dr. Jennifer Harvey opens by saying that she, like many other white Christians, longs for racial reconciliation. But she points out that “decades past the point at which some White Christians finally acknowledged racism as a problem, we remain so inefficacious in realizing justice and a racially transformed church.” She says, “This may be a hard word for some to hear. But the reasons for saying it nonetheless include my being convinced that framing and pursuing responses to race through a vision of reconciliation, as we do in justice-seeking Christian contexts, has proven to be a fundamentally flawed approach. As long as we persist in it, reconciliation itself will remain out of reach.” Instead, she advocates a reparations approach. Too often, reparations is seen as solely a financial equation. But reparations can never be seen in purely financial terms. Reparations represents the righting of wrongs so deep that they represent a wrong done to all of humanity, and in which those who suffer directly as a result of this harm have not yet received justice.

The Conditions for Full Reparations, from the United Nations includes the following components: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition.

- ***Restitution** refers to measures that restore victims to the original situation before they suffered gross violations of international human rights law and/or serious violations of international humanitarian law. For example, restoration of liberty, identity, family life and citizenship, return to one's place of residence, restoration of employment and return of property.*
- ***Compensation** refers to a monetary quantifiable award for any economically assessable damage, whether pecuniary or non-pecuniary, as appropriate and proportional to the gravity of the violation and the circumstances of each case, such as lost opportunities, loss of earnings, and moral damage.*
- ***Rehabilitation** refers to medical and psychological care as well as legal and social services.*
- ***Satisfaction** refers to a broad category of measures, ranging from those aiming at a cessation of violations, to truth-seeking, the search for the disappeared, the recovery and reburial of remains, public apologies, judicial and administrative sanctions, commemoration and memorialization, and human rights training.*
- ***Guarantees of non-repetition** comprise broad structural measures of a policy nature such as institutional reforms aimed at civilian control over military and security forces, strengthening judicial independence, the protection of human rights defenders, and the promotion of human rights standards in public service, law enforcement, the media, industry, and psychological and social services.*

We are called to be repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to live in.

Let's pause our discussion about specific reparations for a moment and consider the familiar story of Zacchaeus.

First a few words about the context. They say a text without a context is a pretext. The context in which we find ourselves today is a city on its edge because of two deaths of black men at the hands of police. But those events cannot be understood aside from the history of oppression in this country against people because of the color of their skin. This is another page in a longer story.

So is the story of Zacchaeus. And it's no accident that Luke puts the story in Jericho.

Jesus met Zacchaeus on the Jericho road. I need to say a few things about Jericho and its relationship to Jerusalem. Jericho represents the secular and Jerusalem represents the Sacred, at least in Biblical understanding. Jericho is the place of the pagans, the outsiders. Jerusalem is the place of the holy. So much of life happens on the Jericho road, somewhere between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Jericho is down in the valley, on the west bank of the river Jordan. These days it's about an hour and half drive from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a city built on a hill. God was seen at Jerusalem, but trade and commerce happened in the strategic town of Jericho. Some never get to Jerusalem. They stay in Jericho. If you were on the Jericho road you were between Jerusalem and Jericho—that place between the sacred and secular, bridging the gap.

These days, warring factions are on the literal Jericho Road. Jericho is controlled by the Palestinians while the shrinking area around it and on the way to Jerusalem are being swallowed up by the Jewish state of Israel. Jericho is forever at a crossroad, forever in conflict.

That tradition is as old as the Hebrew Bible. When Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, he was a conquering general making the city crumble with his might.

King Zedekiah, the last of the kings of Judah who lived in Jerusalem before it was taken over, was captured by the Babylonian army on the Jericho road as he fled his place of security, the walled city of Jerusalem. It was there on the Jericho road that he had to watch his sons executed. Then his own eyes were plucked out.

When Elijah passed his mantle to Elisha, it happened in Jericho.

When John the Baptist was doing his Baptism thing, he was doing it in the river Jordan, just outside of Jericho.

The Bible depicts Jericho as the place of confusion, of divided loyalties, of suspect agendas. From a Jerusalem perspective, if you were from Jericho, you are not to be trusted. I am sure it worked the other way around too. Jerichonians had plenty of reason not to trust the religious/political ethos of Jerusalem.

So naturally, Jesus went to Jericho. It was at Jericho that he met blind Bartimeus. It was at Jericho that Jesus met the rich young ruler. And it was at Jericho that Jesus encountered Zacchaeus. And after his lunch with Zacchaeus, he heads uphill to Jerusalem where all hell will break loose. But to get there, he had to go through Jericho, a city that was always poised for battle. National guard troops patrolled its streets. You could feel the tension right under its surface. Politicians and preachers talk a good game, and too often Jericho pays the price for their hubris.

Preacher Jesus breaks with tradition. He does not come to Jericho to destroy or overthrow or even tell people to repent. Jesus does not come to Jericho to declare who is in and who is out of God's favor. Jesus comes to tell parables and have us make up our own minds about our role in this world. A good parable will make people confront not only Jesus' words, but our own inner demons.

Such is the art of a good story-teller. The stories are woven into our fabric and we are left to ponder the substance of our lives.

Zacchaeus symbolized all of the conflicting loyalties, all of the mistrust, all of the self-hating and other-hating that is so prevalent in this world.

My friend and mentor George Williamson reflected on Zacchaeus in this way:

"Zacchaeus lived in Jericho where he represented the colonial power and made himself rich in their behalf. Jesus took Zacchaeus the way his ancestors had taken Zacchaeus' town; not by direct attack, but by surrounding him, by waiting with God for the walls to come a tumblin' down.

...Thus Jesus ended his ministry as he had begun it, breaking the purity laws by sharing table fellowship with a tax collector...

"There's not a person here who isn't like Zacchaeus, seduced by some system of meanness into serving yourself at others' expense. Most of us serve in the system of gossip, pumping ourselves up by putting others down in hostile, slanderous conversation. Some of us parents use our hierarchical power for emotional benefit against our kids. Some of us kids use our subversive emotional leverage to get from our parents, at their expense, not so much what we authentically need, but what we greedily want. We upper middle-class types can enjoy the exploitation of the poor without ever having to call it that or ever even witnessing a single incidence of class oppression.

To you I say, Jesus wants to share table fellowship with you. What you do with this gracious presence of Jesus in your particular life is not for me to say. All I know is that Jesus, standing in for God, has surrounded you with overwhelming, unconditional and utterly selfless love.” (From an August 4, 1996 sermon entitled “Liberated Jesus and the Tax Collectors”)

And what is Zacchaeus’ response to his encounter with Jesus? He gives back what he has stolen and four times more. He engages in reparations. And by implication, we are challenged to engage in reparations work as well. But it’s important not to focus too narrowly on economic reparations. We ought to be doing that, but we need to put into a larger context.

I like what Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in the Atlantic monthly a few years ago in his essay entitled the Case for Reparations:

We must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. The recovering alcoholic may well have to live with his illness for the rest of his life. But at least he is not living a drunken lie. Reparations beckon us to reject the intoxication of hubris and see America as it is—the work of fallible humans.

Won’t reparations divide us? Not any more than we are already divided. The wealth gap merely puts a number on something we feel but cannot say—that American propensity was ill gotten and selective in its distribution. What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt.

What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to a spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing down hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling “patriotism” while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history. (This essay appears in “We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy” by Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2017. P. 202)

We spiritual siblings of Zacchaeus are on our own Jericho road. We encounter a crossroads, like 38th and Chicago or 63rd and Kathrene, or 13th and University. And we are given a choice about how we are to encounter than intersection. Do we retreat back into our safe turtle shell?

Or do we take it as an opportunity to awaken to the tentacles of our own complicity? A turtle can be safe for a while in the comfort of the shell. But she can only survive if she sticks her neck out and moves.

My friends, let us hear and feel and respond to the rage in our streets. And let us imagine what a repaired breach might look like. Let us imagine what restored streets might resemble. Then let us, with Zacchaeus, take our own tentative, reparative, and bold steps in the direction of a repaired national psyche. That would be worth of the word ‘resurrection.’