

“Our Responsibility for Repair” by Erica Lloyd



Jubilee

October 30, 2022

Note: Lucy Slater's prayer for Peace and Justice follows Erica's sermon text.

Over the last year and a half I have seen how speaking a truth can give it a life of its own. A word becomes flesh, if you will. And so I hold that power with care and hope as I stand here this morning.

Eighteen months ago, in April of 2021, I scrapped a sermon I

had been working on for three months and instead preached about Derek Chauvin's conviction for the murder of George Floyd and the need to do *something* about the epidemic of police violence against people of color in this country. I didn't know what that *something* was, and so I stood here and asked for help. Shortly thereafter, Sallie Holmes, Lucy Slater, Amy Moffatt and I, AKA "the SEAL team"- preached together to ask this community what we ought to be doing to dismantle white supremacy.

Now, a year and a half later, what began as my desperate cry for help will officially be recognized and blessed as the Racial and Ethnic Justice Ministry Team following this sermon. The words that we spoke that Sunday have become: another 65 (plus or minus a few) weekly vigils, nearly 600 letters written for the Vote Forward campaign, a new statement on our website sharing our commitment to dismantling white supremacy, a tour educating us on the history of racism in this city, and maybe most importantly, a few hard conversations and opportunities to look inwards at our own shortcomings, misunderstandings, and blindspots. We hope this is just the beginning.

I want to acknowledge that when Peter suggested that one of us from the ministry team sign up to preach this Sunday, I came to the lectionary with an agenda; I came asking, as I did in that sermon eighteen months ago: what does this scripture have to say to me about racial justice? As author Rachel Held Evans wrote, quote: "We all go to the text looking for something, and we all have a tendency to find it... I suspect Jesus knew this when he said, 'Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find..." end quote ("Inspired," P 57).

And so, when I read the story of Zacchaeus with that question in mind, what I found was... a story about reparations.

As a recap: Rumor had it that Jesus was going to pass through Jericho en route to Jerusalem. Zacchaeus, who was short, was so determined to see Jesus that he climbed a tree to be able to see over the crowd. Now, maybe this man who had used his position as a chief tax collector to exploit others for personal gain had climbed that tree with the intention of booing Jesus and throwing rocks at him. After all, Jesus's teachings about accumulating wealth at the expense of others were pretty clear. But perhaps something had already shifted inside of Zacchaeus; perhaps he was truly excited to see Jesus. From the moment that Jesus engaged him, Zacchaeus responded with what seems like genuine joy.

This is one of those stories where it helps me to reset it in a modern context, to understand just how *insane* this scene is. It's too easy for me to ignore the implications of Zacchaeus being a tax collector – so I need to imagine that it's someone like Tom Shelton, the owner of chicken factories who has gotten rich off of exploiting the vulnerability of his immigrant workforce, or a member of the Sackler family behind the opioid epidemic, or someone else who has enriched him or herself through taking advantage of the defenseless – that is who was up in that tree. That is the person that Jesus engaged, and that is the person who, surprisingly, responded joyfully to Jesus' call.

And everyone else there watching – they were upset. And rightly so. There's Mr. Rich Guy who has oppressed so many people, suddenly playing nice with Jesus of all people, the same Jesus who just a few days ago said, You can't serve both God and Money?!?! I would be part of that angry crowd, as frustrated with Jesus for associating with Zacchaeus as I am disgusted with Zacchaeus for the things he has done. I would have been one of the ones shouting out all of the ways Zacchaeus had profited off of exploiting his community, in case Jesus had mistaken him for someone else.

In the face of that aggrieved crowd, here's what Zacchaeus did

NOT do: He did not pretend that the injustice is ancient history, over and done with. He did not whisk Jesus away, hoping to blot out the memory of the crowd's criticisms by providing a really delicious meal and good wine. He didn't yell back at the people about their own bad choices.

Instead, Zacchaeus decides to try to repair the damage he has done. Reparations.

I'm not the first to make this interpretation, nor am I the first to see in this story an example for white Americans to redress the harms we have perpetuated against indigenous, black, and other people of color throughout this country's history. The United Church of Christ website references the Zacchaeus story in explaining the denomination's support for reparations: quote "To make things right, we must follow Zacchaeus' example – account for what we have done and offer repentance and recompense to our neighbors." And the World Communion for Reformed Churches has launched the Zacchaeus Project, which is, quote "addressing social and ecological debts, including reparations for colonialism and slavery, at local, national and global levels. The campaign would at once serve to educate our churches about the issues involved while advocating for tax justice and reparations at the highest level." End quote

Now if this interpretation of Zacchaeus' story seems like too much of a stretch, you are not alone. If you google "Zacchaeus reparations," you'll get nearly as many sermons arguing *against* drawing this conclusion as those for.

The argument tends to go something like this: *Zacchaeus was the one who perpetrated harm, so it was appropriate that he be the one to make restitution – but you can't apply that logic to white people today. I wasn't the one who enslaved people, or stole their land, or denied their rights. It would be right to ask those who committed such atrocities to pay, but most of them are dead and gone.* End of story.

The first thing I would say in response to this argument is that Zacchaeus paid reparations not just because he had inflicted suffering but because he had *profited* off of it. And the reality is that white people and predominantly white institutions *continue* to profit in myriad ways from the persistence of white supremacy in this country. The compounding interest of this nation's original sin continues to pay dividends.

Furthermore, Zaccheus is doing two different things here: redress for specific, demonstrable harms ("if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much"), and also a more general redistribution of wealth ("half of my possessions I will give to the poor"). Because Zacchaeus is rich and others are poor *by design*. This wasn't one man's evil scheme; this was how these cities were governed under Roman rule. Exploitation always has been and always will be an intentional feature of empire, and God's people must be intentional in undoing it. Our liturgical season of Jubilee also reminds us that God made the periodic redistribution of wealth a central component of what community should look like.

If we take seriously the damage done by white supremacy, and if we take seriously the ways that white people continue to benefit from it, like Zacchaeus, we might find that we would rejoice in the opportunity to return these ill-gotten gains. Notice there's no arm-twisting by Jesus here. It's not even his suggestion – this is all Zacchaeus.

But. It's possible to feel this way yet still end up arguing against reparations. Some people, myself included, believe that reparations are important on a moral level, but get bogged down in the logistical difficulties: Who would pay, who would get paid? How much? For how long? How would we ensure that we do not create new injustices in the implementation of such a complicated project? Even if we could come to some sort of agreement on the *policies* of reparations, the *politics* are just as daunting. How would this EVER get through Congress!?!?

It hurts my brain to wrestle with these questions, so I'm inclined not to. But on our recent tour, my dad talked about Founding Fathers like George Washington and George Mason – people who really thought slavery was awful and should be ended, people who were actually in the position to do something!, but couldn't wrap their minds around how to make it possible. Because they lacked the imagination and courage and perseverance to figure it out, slavery persisted for nearly another century. I don't want to be someone who does nothing about injustice just because this is *hard*.

So how do we find a way forward? According to Greg Thompson and Duke Kwon, two Presbyterian ministers who recently co-wrote a book called "Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair," these questions and challenges need not drive us away from the idea of reparations altogether. Rather, they suggest zooming in to something much smaller, where it's possible to get more concrete with those big philosophical questions. Quote "these questions are best answered not a priori and in the abstract, but through collaborative conversations in local communities."

Instead of biting our nails over the difficulties of reparations on a national scale, what if we focused our efforts on thinking through what reparations might look like here, in our little church?

There are churches around the country who have begun grappling with this same question over the past few years. Here's a little sample of what's happening:

- Memorial Episcopal Church in Baltimore will be disbursing 5 grants of \$100,000/year over the next five years for affordable housing, safe drinking water, criminal justice reform, more urban green spaces, local schools and more jobs for black youth in Baltimore.
- In Brookline, Massachusetts, the United Church of Christ Congregation takes up a special offering each time they

sing a traditional black spiritual, based on the assumption that the slaves who composed the hymns were never compensated. The money – roughly \$12,000 raised in the past year – goes to a music program for black youth.

- In Kirkland Washington, Salt House Lutheran Church has created a reparations fund that gives to whomever asks. The money has gone to more than a dozen recipients for medical bills, housing, business start-up expenses, and other needs.

What might we learn from these churches? Two things come to mind for me:

First, many of these congregations have done a lot of digging to begin to uncover the ways that their churches have perpetrated and/or benefitted from racism. I think this would be an incredibly difficult effort for us, and I also think it could be very worthwhile. Seekers has been a predominantly white institution since its founding over 40 years ago and yet I think most of us might struggle to name specific ways white supremacy has played a role in the life of this community, both historically and in the present moment. How can we take seriously our responsibilities for repair as Zacchaeus did, unless we really see the nature of the problem? What would it look like for Seekers to undertake such a project?

The second thing is, as I read about what these churches are doing, it struck me how much money Seekers already gives both within and outside of our community. The ways that we as a church already practice generosity are really significant and therefore worth reexamining. Are we thinking about our giving as “our” funds that we’re distributing? What might happen if we really think of the money that we hold both as individuals and as a community as wealth that has been stolen from people of color? Would that change the way we manage our domestic and international giving, or the Holy Spirit Fund? Would we do anything differently if we considered these as reparations? Maybe not – but maybe.

Obviously, yet again I have more questions than answers. I still don't have all the answers to those questions I started asking 18 months ago. But I have learned so much that I might not have had I kept those questions to myself, had we not come together. I'm so thankful for this community – thankful that we are finding some answers together, and helping each other bear the burden of the unresolved questions, too. May it continue to be so. Amen.

A Prayer for Peace and Justice by Lucy Slater

In the US we have all been born into a system that has allowed us to become one of the wealthiest countries in the world. But our system is based on individualism, self-interest and competition. It considers the natural world, creatures, and human beings as disposable resources to exploit in service of this system. To keep us focused on consuming, it isolates us and deters us from seeking comfort and fulfillment in community, friendship, and family. It accepts the necessity of having losers in order to create and reward winners, and to allow us to accept this, it encourages us to despise, dehumanize, and deny others. Let us pray:

I confess, oh god, that I am afraid. I am afraid that if I don't compete, if I don't acquire wealth I and my family will suffer. I want to hold on to what I have. I am afraid there is not enough to go around.

I acknowledge that because I am white and Christian and well educated, I am a winner in this system. I confess that too often I accept and am complicit with the creation of losers. I ignore and deny their suffering, afraid that if I pay too much attention, I will lose what I have.

Oh God, help us to see you and your creation in a new way. Help us to open our hearts to our fears – to sit with them and face them. Remind us of the abundance of your spirit all

around us, in the people we love, in the sunshine, the trees, the beauty of creation, and help us to draw upon your spirit as we face our fears.

You created us with our own essential goodness. We know in our deepest hearts that we desire to live in harmony and relationship with all creation. In our deepest hearts, we know that we do not want to dispose of other people – that we want to see them as our brothers and sisters.

Teach us to see life with an attitude of abundance, help us to let go of all we hug to ourselves in our fear of scarcity, and help us to take the leap of faith and reach out to others, offer them what they need, and trust your in your love, and in the strength of our family, our community, and our church to provide all that we need.