

The Necessity, and Healing Power of Reparations

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Rev. Dr. J. Michael Solberg

Texts: Matthew 5: 23-24

If, therefore, you are bringing your gift to the altar and recall that your brother or sister holds something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar, and first go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

When you grow up in the Chicago area, as I did, and pay any attention at all to the world around you, there is one inescapable mystery. Why is the South Side of Chicago the way it is? The South Side is, to this day, sadly, all Black, and the North Side is all white. The average net wealth of white people in Chicago is \$210,000, and the average net wealth of Black people is \$0. There is roughly 500% more crime in some areas of the South Side than on the North Side, and the clearance rate for homicides is remarkably low, in the 15% range.

As a teenager, becoming aware of the world, I wondered why the South Side was the way it was. Why did basically all the Black people of Chicago live there? Why was it so poor? Why was it so violent? While I remember having those questions, I never had any answers, beyond what I already knew as a teenager were racist excuses – like Black people don't work hard and they don't maintain proper two parent households. But seeing through those excuses, I still didn't find the solution to this puzzle. Somewhat embarrassingly, for decades, the South Side of Chicago remained a mystery to me. And, of course, that's how our society wants it – the amorphous powers-that-be want such inequality to remain a mystery, unexplained and inexplicable.

That finally changed about 10 years ago when I read a book called “Family Properties: How the Struggle Over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America,” by Beryl Satter. In short, I learned about redlining. Legally, through 1968, and illegally long after that, Black people were simply not allowed to own property in vast areas of Chicago, and because of predatory lending practices, most were stuck in high-rent, low-quality rentals, and those who did get mortgages were unable to build wealth because of those blatantly unfair loan terms. For decades, white property owners, slum lords as they are called, and white bankers made huge profits, aided and abetted by the racist regime of Mayor Richard J Daley and other politicians, including Black alderman who played along in order to maintain their positions. In other words, the South Side of Chicago was the way it was, and is the way it is, because of systematic racist oppression. In 1966, when Martin Luther King started his “Northern Campaign” for civil rights, he was attacked by a mob throwing stones and bricks. By the time he left Chicago, he concluded: “I have never seen even in Mississippi and Alabama, mobs as hostile and as hate-filled as I'm seeing in Chicago.” I imagine the same narrative has played out in similar ways here in Cambridge and Boston, although I don't know the details.

I tell you that story to tell you that that is when I was convinced of the need for reparations. And not just the need for reparations, but the rightness of reparations. The moral imperative of reparations. The Christian responsibility to support, pursue, and pay reparations.

And I tell you that story to reveal that for me, this is something that comes from a very deep and visceral

sense of the injustice of it all. It doesn't come directly from scripture, although I hope scripture has created that deep and visceral reaction in me. It doesn't come directly from my theology, with the same caveat. It comes from my gut more than my head, from my gut even more than my heart, I'd say. I grew up with a mystery that was no mystery, but a manipulation, a lie. And the truth, when I finally had the eyes to see it, was infuriating. And it was a call to change, to reparations. As Kwon and Thompson put it in their book, "Reparations," it was a call to repair the theft of truth, the theft of power, and the theft of wealth.

Fredrick Douglas famously refused to celebrate the Fourth of July, powerfully and in many ways transformationally making the point that the Fourth of July provided no freedom to his people. For people of African ancestry, Independence Day gave no independence. The oppression that is embodied in the social and economic reality of the South Side of Chicago shows that Fredrick Douglas was right 160 years ago, and he's still right today. Juneteenth, which many Black folk call "Black Independence Day" is both a wonderful cause for celebration, but also remains aspirational. Until the work of reparations is done, in its fullest sense, there will not be complete freedom for those who have suffered from White Supremacy, in all its forms, from Selma to Chicago, from slavery to redlining, and so much more.

Very near the theological lens through which I view the world is the economic lens that shapes so much of how I see things. In truth, when it comes to reparations there is no separation between the theological and the economic lens. Jesus made this clear when he said "If, therefore, you are bringing your gift to the altar and recall that your brother or sister holds something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar, and first go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." That deep moral obligation is not just a barrier between me and my sibling, but between me and God as well.

When addressing White Supremacy, all our great leaders have seen reparations, including repair for the theft of wealth, as an unavoidable step in dismantling such oppression. It's where James Forman ended up, where Martin Luther King ended up, where Ida B Wells ended up. I'm not calling you stupid, but you'll recognize the phrase, "It's the economy stupid." But it's not the economy the way political strategists think of it, it's the economy as in the economic system. It's the way we think of and value wealth. It's the reshaping of our economic world view toward the "we economy" of Nwamaka Agbo. As Kwon and Thompson summarize her work, White Supremacy is rooted in a fundamentally objectifying and extractive view of the world in which goods are held by right, accumulated by power, and held in exclusive perpetuity by those who are White. This view of the world is the headwaters of both the unimaginable wealth and the unending poverty of our communities. Nwamaka Agbo, however, views the world and its wealth differently (and I might add, far more consistently with the Bible). In her view, the world is not simply a resource to be extracted, but a gift to be cared for with others. Further, the obligations of this care are not fundamentally defined by one's ability to accumulate but by one's responsibility to collaborate with others for the well-being of all. She calls this vision a "we economy." It's at this fundamental level of the rethinking and revaluing of what wealth is all about that we need to conceive of the work of reparations. Nothing else will sustain us or change us, and nothing else will thaw the forces that want to maintain the way things are.

So, First Church, if I may speak to you as a little bit of an outsider now – or at least as an interim: keep your reparations work alive! This was not just a Dan thing, not just a Beloved Community thing. It's a Christian thing, a human thing. The work of repair, the work of seeing through the so-called mysteries of why things are the way they are, of sharing power the way it is meant to be shared in human community,

and of returning stolen wealth from people of African descent...it's all work for all of us. Our brothers and sisters do indeed have something against us, and in order to ever properly be in the presence of God, we must do this work of repair.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.

