

Dangerous Preaching: Economic Justice and Reparations

Mark 10:17-25, Luke 19:1-10

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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“A man ran up to Jesus...” That is the way the story Alex read begins in Mark. We aren’t told his name, his age, his occupation, his marital or economic status. We don’t know if he likes Jesus or has a dagger hidden behind his back. We don’t know. But Jesus can see that the man. He can see that he is wealthy. Jesus can see what we the reader can’t see.

The man kneels down at Jesus’ feet. In every other story in the Gospel of Mark when someone kneels down at the feet of Jesus, they are asking to be healed. “Good teacher,” the man says, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Don’t call me good,” Jesus says. “God alone is good. Besides, eternal life has nothing to do with being good. It is the gift of our Good God. So, I assume you know the commandments: don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t bear false witness; don’t defraud; honor your father and mother.” Jesus doesn’t name all ten of the commandments, just the ones that have to do with one’s relationship with other human beings. And did you notice that one of them is different? Instead of saying, “Thou shalt not covet” Jesus says, “don’t defraud.” Jesus gives the commandment some nuance. Why tell this rich man not to covet when he already has all the best things. Jesus has a different message for the wealthy. In a world of economic injustice, defrauding others brings one unfair economic gain. Jesus is addressing the economic divide that exists at his time....and unfortunately in our time.

If fraudulent practices have brought this man financial gain, he is simply unaware of it. He is sure that what makes him wealthy was achieved by legitimate means. He believes that he has participated in a meritocracy – that he and his family have gotten where they are because of hard work and those who aren’t blessed like he and his family simply haven’t worked hard enough. He has followed the rules of the economic system and benefited from it, unaware that the rules of the system were created in his favor.

The man simply can’t see his privilege. “I’ve been following these commandments since my youth,” the man says with all earnestness. Jesus looks at this man’s privileged sincerity and his eyes fill with love for him. I am constantly amazed at the way Jesus loves, even those who fail to see what he is telling them. Jesus says, “There is something you must do.” “What is it?” he asks eagerly. “Sell everything you have, give the money to the poor and then come and follow me.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “Go make a substantial gift to the synagogue and you are good.” He doesn’t say, “Sell everything and give the money away.” He isn’t just asking the man to unburden himself of his money. He is asking him to make reparations. We have been hearing that word quite a bit lately, but it isn’t anything new. Jesus invited people to make reparations as part of

their discipleship. “If you want to be part of God’s kindom,” Jesus says, “then make reparations.”

The rich man, kneeling at Jesus’ came to Jesus in hopes of getting the one thing he doesn’t yet have. He is used to getting what he wants. How does it get his ticket to the kindom of heaven? Jesus’ answer is not what he expected. The author of the Gospel of Mark tells us that the man was shocked and left grieving because he would have so much to sell. The biblical writers don’t often focus on someone’s emotional response so, when it does, sit up and take notice. Jesus tells the rich man that there is only one thing he needs to do, and he decides the cost is too great. He chooses the world and forfeits his soul.

In the other story we heard today, Jesus is on another journey, passing through Jericho when he looks up into a tree and sees Zaccheus perched there. Zaccheus was a Jew who had made a financial deal with the Roman occupation to collect the taxes of his Jewish neighbors. He wasn’t breaking any laws. He was following the unjust law that required Jews to pay taxes to Rome for the privilege of being occupied.

When we tell the story of Zaccheus we often focus on the part where Jesus spots him in the tree and invites himself to Zaccheus’ house for lunch. We teach our children the song about Zaccheus. Do you know it?

Zaccheus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he
It ends with Jesus saying:

Zaccheus, you come down from there,
For I’m going to your house today
For I’m going to your house today

But that isn’t the culmination of the biblical story. The song we teach our children leaves off the most important part. After spending time with Jesus, Zaccheus realizes that his journey of redemption will require him to make reparations. Zaccheus knows he has repair work to do, and he declares: “I will give away half of all I own to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay them back four times what I stole.” Zaccheus knows that he hasn’t done anything any other tax collector would do but he now sees that he has participated in a system that has benefited him while harming others. Zaccheus does what the rich young man wouldn’t. Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house because Zaccheus is making reparations.”

Back in May, Dr. Drew Hart came to us via Zoom for a Q&A around his newest book, *Who Will Be a Witness?* When we asked him what would be some good next steps for the La Verne Church of the Brethren on the journey towards racial justice. He suggested that we might want to do a Race and Place study of our church history and within our individual family histories. To address racism, we also need to look at our geographical histories. Most communities are segregated along racial lines. Why?

There are many factors that have kept classism and racism alive in our culture. Slavery was replaced with Black codes which were replaced with vagrancy laws that increased the number of convicts. Convict leasing became a reality, allowing private citizens to contract for cheap labor that convicts were required to do....another form of slave labor. Jim Crow, segregation, redlining, the burning of Black Wall Street, restrictive covenants, redlining and other forms of systemic racism in real estate, employment and financial institutions, the preschool to prison pipeline, poor access to health care and higher education – just to name a few -- have insured white wealth in America. The impact of racism and slavery is so deep in our country, and we have not come to terms with the dehumanization that is built into our historical reality.

After Dr. Hart suggested we look at how race and place has impacted who the La Verne Church of the Brethren is today, the Envisioning Commission began working on a plan to look at the history of San Gabriel Valley and how this church may have benefited from our history as a predominantly white church. We have asked our Summer Service workers this year to help us by doing some research about the native peoples' who lived on the land we now claim as our church home, as well as to look at the history of segregation in the City of La Verne. But Dr. Hart's challenge wasn't just to us as a church institution but to take on this challenge in our own individual family histories. How have you and I and our families benefited or have been harmed by white dominant culture?

I know that the suggestion of reparations mystifies and frightens many of those of us who identify as white. That is why this series is called "Dangerous Preaching." White folks need to be brave Christians in the journey towards addressing racial injustice. I have heard people argue that slavery ended in 1865 so why are we discussing this now? I know it is scary for those of us for whom a true and honest study of race and place means we would have to rewrite our autobiographies. No longer can we believe that we got where we are today solely by our own hard work and ingenuity.

I understand that this is a complicated issue, but difficulty is never an excuse for refusing to do the important work of justice. As we step into it we can learn from others. There are examples of churches and denominations across our country that are acknowledging that the privileges they now enjoy were gained on the backs of slavery and the colonization of others. The Episcopal Diocese of Texas has acknowledged that its first bishop was a slaveholder. St. James Episcopal Church of New York City erected a plaque on their building acknowledging that their church was made possible by wealth that resulted from slavery. The Minnesota Council of Churches is launching a first of its kind "truth and reparations" initiative modeled after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. It is a ten-year initiative involving 25 different denominations and acknowledges the harm done to Black Americans and indigenous people, uniting the injustices done to both of those peoples rather than pitting them against each other. They recognize the absolute importance of truth telling and the hearing of stories to the healing of racial injustice in our country.

Reparations have been made in our history as a nation. In 1988, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which granted reparations to each surviving Japanese American who had been imprisoned during World War II.

We think of reparations solely as a financial equation, but that is too narrow. Reparation is the righting of wrongs. Jesus himself is calling us to this work. Jesus talked to the rich young ruler and Zaccheus about it back in the first century CE. But Jesus didn't come up with the idea. God's call for a Jubilee year was about reparations. Knowing that the social fabric has a way of tearing and becoming unjust, God asked the people to make reparations every seven years, instead of failing to make reparations for over 400 hundred years. As it turns out, making reparations is a spiritual issue.

We are at the very beginning stage, here at the La Verne Church of the Brethren, of re-looking at our history and how we tell it. This is an invitation to us to follow the example of Zaccheus and not the rich young ruler....an invitation to stand up like Zaccheus and take a good hard look at ourselves and how we got to where we are. Zaccheus resolved to repair the harm that benefited him at the expense and oppression and subjugation of others. Zaccheus understood that he could no longer protect the system of the Empire that oppressed some. In order for him to be reconciled to God Zaccheus had to repair his relationship with his neighbors. And when he made reparations Jesus declared, "Zaccheus, you are a child of Abraham and Sarah and today salvation has come to your house."

What I know about you, church family, is that you have been brave before. You have stood up for justice in the past. Those of you with privilege have challenged your assumptions and done your work. Those of us who have suffered oppression have spoken your truth and trusted this church family with your stories. We are more whole because of these past journeys. It is time to stretch those courage muscles again and declare ourselves ready to make things right....to mend the social fabric. What we need for this work of truth and reparations is here. What we need is here. Let us commit ourselves to the work of justice once again. Amen.