

APPENDIX C - Power and Powerlessness - Psychological Ramifications and the Future

The descendants of the slaves in our country, as a group, still live today without power. There are a number of dynamics that underlie this powerlessness but a particularly important one is the way white people walk in the world. In general, there is an assumption that white people can go almost anywhere; that they will be accepted almost anywhere; and that white customs and norms are the ones to adhere to. All of those feelings give white Americans a sense of power – a sense of being comfortable in the world. Perhaps, there is not an awareness of this power because white people have lived with it since Europeans' began settling on this continent. The reality is that the very whiteness of the dominant culture in our country creates a power inequality between the races.

The concepts of power and powerlessness have strong emotional impact for each of us. Most of us experience one or both during our lifetimes. The ability to have control of our lives can give us a general sense of security and well-being, while the inability to control our lives leads to a sense of powerlessness, to insecurity, to depression and anger. There are consequences to constantly feeling powerless; when we have limited agency, it is incredibly hard to build a life of success, security, and love. Repeated exposure to trauma can lead to post traumatic stress disorder, which only enhances the feeling of powerlessness, as well as further social isolation.

The natural human condition that leads to fear when we are exposed to something, or someone, that we believe threatens our way of life creates divisions among people. The part of the brain that leads to fight or flight fires up and causes us react to protect ourselves. The person, the unknown culture/race, or misunderstood situation can lead to discomfort and fear. The only way to change the situation is to develop relationships with each other.

It is relationship that leads us to vulnerability, understanding, love, and reconciliation. It is relationship that moves the powerless to a place of power and levels the playing field. Until we build those relationships, that community of love, there will continue to be a divide in this country that will only grow the disparity between those who have power and those who do not. Do we truly want to live in a country that continues the power struggle and injustice for black people? Do we continue to avoid the conversations and acts needed to make a difference in our world? Is it the way that Jesus wanted us to live? Hopefully, the answer to the first two questions is NO. We know that the answer to the latter question is a resounding NO.

It is the responsibility of a just society to recognize and repair the breach between those who have security and those who do not. As followers of Christ, we understand that to recognize all people as brothers and sisters is the beginning of creating the *Beloved*

Community. It is by working to listen to one other, to know one other, and to love one other that we can begin to set the firm foundations of holy equity.

And yet, the means to beginning such a sacred conversation requires immense trust and a kind of goodwill that has historically been anemic, if not empty. But if we are serious about the real work of reconciliation - of repair - then a kind of bravery and spiritual fortitude will be required of us that has, perhaps, been rarely seen in previous generations. I believe that we are very brave.

The term reparations has certainly become a “trigger word” for people when applied to matters concerning racial equity and justice. It is a term which conjures images of the Reagan-era “Welfare Queen,” and ungrateful, unrepentant, and undeserving recipients of handouts. This stigma is set against the long held mythology of the “noble American worker,” which has been idealized since Post-WWII America and taps into our sentiments of opportunity, self-reliance, and self-actualization that are part of the American ideal.

The subject of reparations is mired in emotion; it is often mischaracterized and certainly largely misunderstood. It is a complex issue that involves economic, political, and sociological dimensions that are difficult to grasp without a willingness to engage more deeply than having a quick emotional response to the word. The issue highlights the racial divide among us, creates varying levels of resentment and suspicion, and accentuates a pain that has long plagued our country since its founding.

Reparations, at its base, means to repair that which has been broken. It is not just about monetary compensation. An act of reparation is the attempt to make whole again, and/or to restore; to offer atonement; to make amends; to reconcile for a wrong or injury.

Isn't that our work in this broken world? As the Church, our primary mission is *“restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ”* (BCP, p. 855). This is our primary call and charge, and we take on this responsibility by praying, worshipping, proclaiming the Gospel and promoting justice and love. Our mission is further met by understanding and living out our Baptismal Covenant (BCP, p. 416), not only with one another, but in the world as witnesses to God's love for all of God's people.

With reference to the passage from Isaiah, then, I believe that the work of reparations (with regard to racial equity and justice) will require claiming/reclaiming a clear understanding of the word's meaning, as well as engaging some of the fears and anxieties which make such work and exploration complicated.

This is a task far too big for one person. Instead, I would like to offer a brief reflection on part of the Isaiah passage (see Appendix B), and then offer a few possibilities for engaging in some of this work.

In the passage from Isaiah, we read a message of hope to a people who have spent ages in exile. Israel is no longer a people who are their own. They have no ‘place;’ they have no sign

of God's promises; their identity has been plundered. However, into this history the prophet speaks of repairing the "breach." And while the signs and means of repair are works of mercy, equity, and compassion...all of us as readers of the message are left to infer what the "breach" actually is, and what caused it.

For those of us considering this idea of reparations, it would seem that we are given a multitude of ways to do works of mercy, justice, and compassion. And while this is an aid to the repair work to the breached wall, it doesn't seem to fully close the breach, and in many cases can leave workers frustrated, and even burned out. This, of course, is to say nothing of the problems of sustainability and the resources needed for such works.

And yet, all of this begs a question. "What exactly is the breach we are trying to repair?"

This passage from Isaiah is the scriptural foundation upon which the study of reparations is based. Isaiah reminds us that we, as people of faith, are called to meet the expectations and commandments of God; that as people of faith, we are baptized to keep God's covenant, which calls us to uphold and respect the dignity of all God's people; that as people of faith, we are called to be the "repairers of the breach" – any breach that separates and divides us from the love of God.

If the breach is labeled as simply racial injustice and racism, we already know that there would be those who would deny, and even detract from, the validity of such problems. So, the breach remains because people cannot agree that a breach exists. On the other hand, for those who would deny the breach, it might be assumed that their denial is related to the fact that they have rarely experienced the breach. It may well be that the denial of the disparity of racial equity is either too far from their personal experience, or relates to their own fear of addressing such a large problem.

Our discipleship with Christ calls for us to do much. Discipleship isn't always comfortable and it's certainly not without cost. It's the tension between the way we live our faith and the ideal to which we give witness. As faithful disciples, we are called to do more than just spread and share the Good News. We are also called to enter into the suffering of others and to help bear the weight of that suffering. The matter of reparations is not only weighty, but it bears many ugly heads that have long gone untamed and unchallenged.

Beloved, it will be by our lives and actions with regard to racial reconciliation that we will speak most prophetically to the world. In this way, we are writing an Epistle to the whole Church. This holy missive was begun through the action and dedication of our forebears in the Civil Rights era who were convicted by the Gospel imperative of Love and Justice. For as we know there can be no love without justice, and the followers of Jesus are called to love. But this is an imperative that finds its roots in that long-awaited hope that God had dreamed, even at the foot of Mount Sinai, where a battered bunch of freed slaves were becoming the called people of God. Through prayerful and inspired study, I believe we can do the work of repair. Through reparation, we can be leaders in the long-awaited process of

reconciliation that can lead to that dream that God has dreamed for us, a truly *Beloved Community*.

How do we look at reparations from a religious and/or Christian point of view?

How, then, do we as a diocese continue a genuine process of remembering, repairing, restoring, and reconciling ourselves to one another and to God? Primarily, we must be willing to study and dialogue on the theology, history and the multi-faceted issues associated with the highly-charged subject of reparations as it relates to the longstanding effects that the legacy of slavery has and continues to have in our country.

Reparations is more than just a matter of justice; it is a path that leads us to a place of truth with one another and with God. The Church, both nationally and right here in the Diocese of Maryland, continues to struggle, sometimes mightily, with acknowledging, repenting, or apologizing for its complicity in the legacy of slavery. Historical documents show how The Episcopal Church helped not only to establish but also to sustain systemic and institutionalized racism within the United States. The call of the Church today has to be a full commitment to becoming a transformed, anti-racist Church and to work towards healing, reconciliation, and providing a means of restoration of wholeness for all of God's people.

When we look at reparations in its simplest form, without any rhetoric attached, and we remind ourselves of the mission of the Church and how we are called to carry it out, we find that we are looking at a matter of justice. Justice requires that we seek and speak the truth with one another.

How might we look at providing reparations in a meaningful way that acknowledges our sinful past? While we can never fully repair the damages that have directly and indirectly impacted the black community, there are sure and positive steps that can be developed and implemented to help bring about wholeness and speak to our genuine desire for reconciliation.

The Sutton Scholars® High School Enrichment Program is a good example of a type of reparations. This program is designed to help inner city youth, particularly black youth. Its aim is to make their high school years a successful venture and to not allow them to fall prey to the many traps that confront them, or to live into the prevailing belief that they are "less than" others in our society. Programs such as this have proven to offer a significant contribution to helping young black youth stay out of the criminal justice system. These kinds of programs are invaluable in helping to repair the brokenness.

Other possibilities are:

- Improve existing housing assistance programs that help Black Americans move towards purchasing homes.

- Develop mixed-use housing that helps create communities of various socio-economic groups and not just low-income housing that creates communities that become alienated and labeled.
- Invest in existing communities by bringing desperately needed services such as grocery stores that are affordable; urgent care centers; community centers for not only youth, but all ages; pharmacies; green spaces/community gardens.
- Develop and implement meaningful job training programs that are partnered with corporations and local businesses for actual job placement. These programs must also include social services, such as case management and financial literacy programs, to increase opportunities for long-term employment and successful personal money management.
- Encourage seminaries to have at least a 30% ratio of faculty of color. As well, develop and implement non-traditional paths for ordination for black students who have been denied entry into seminary because of lack of undergraduate degrees but have the capacity for ministry. Finally, offer free or significantly reduced tuition for seminary training.
- Provide free tuition at community colleges for black Americans and reduced tuition at undergraduate schools and graduate programs.

These are some suggestions and you will have others. Is there a ministry you are passionate about that helps repair the inequalities in our society of the legacy of slavery? Do you work with organizations outside the Church that are doing this work? Do you have ideas for new ministries that would help build the *Beloved Community*?

Questions for Reflection:

1. With reference to the passage from Isaiah in Appendix B, the work of reparations (with regard to racial equity and justice) will require claiming/reclaiming a clear understanding of the word's meaning, as well as engaging some of the fears and anxieties which make such work and exploration complicated. What are your immediate emotional and intellectual responses to the word reparations? What is your understanding of the word and what other understandings might arise as you take time to explore its meaning biblically and more deeply?
2. What role do our Christian faith and the teachings of Jesus play in your answers to the above questions?
3. What do you think Jesus really meant when he commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves? Be specific in your personal or group reflection.

4. Have you yourself or anyone in your family experienced the ripple effects of abuse from generations before? How has it affected you or your family in the present? If not a family member, do you know someone whose life has been made difficult because of psychological trauma stemming from past generations? Do you think there is a parallel to the effects of slavery on present generations? Why or why not?
5. Have you or anyone you know ever had your identity stolen or denied in any way? How does that make you feel? Have you ever been in a position where you thought you were not as good as the others around you? Has that been pointed out? How did that make you feel?
6. What is your first memory or experience of injustice in your life or the life of the world?
7. Do you think it is the responsibility of a just society to recognize and repair the breach between those who have security and those who do not? Why or why not?
8. Do you believe that as faithful disciples, we are called to do more than just spread and share the Good News?
9. As disciples, are we also called to enter into the suffering of others and to help bear the weight of that suffering? Why or why not? What do you think Scripture has to say about this?