

## On Reparations

January 14, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Carla Arevalo Carbajal

*Texts: Mark 5: 25-34*

Good morning first church and thank you for joining us this Sunday morning. I am so glad to be back from vacation and what better way to do it than sharing on this second Sunday after epiphany.

And speaking of creativity and visualization, I want to come into this passage with that spirit of “having eyes to see and ears to listen” and let us walk together into this story and its revelation on reparations.

So, reparations. I know this is a word that has been used and sometimes misused, under many different motifs. Now I say often misused because throughout history we have seen the ways in which interpretations of stories and scripture have been used to oppress and advance racism. Yet- I have also seen interpretations that have brought healing and repair.

My own experience within the reparations journey has been one where I have been able to see the depth and breadth that is needed. My first encounter with reparations within the U.S. was one filled with a lot of grief and anger because of all the truth that was revealed to me about the legacies of slavery in this country and the imperative need for repair. I started to wonder what are the roles of different institutions with regards to reparations. And more often, how does scripture and communities of faith can be part of this greater action of justice and truth telling in this country today. We have our truth tellers portraits in our church that reminds us of the work of love and the work of social movement that go hand in hand with repair as well.

I would love for us to see the importance of visibility. Let us hold this word close as we continue today.

What could visibility do in a culture of white supremacy that likes to conceal the truth about the past. What does visibility do to the often invisible systems of injustice?

I want to bring the story found in Mark 5 as a story where visibility leads to healing and liberation.

We get a story with a lot of moving pieces and it seems to be a straightforward healing story where not only one, but two people receive a healing miracle from Jesus. But what if there could be more?

You see before this passage...

Jairus comes to Jesus

He asks healing for his daughter

But right at this moment in the story there is a woman who is trying to reach Jesus for healing but is blocked by a crowd.

People are so focused on the miraculous power that Jesus represents for them that they are not able to see the woman on the floor trying to reach Jesus.

It got to the point that the crowd only left access to Jesus's cloak for this woman to reach. Using Lordes words from our second reading, in this scene we see how depersonalization and invisibility can block the way.

I wonder if this different angle from this scene in Mark connects to one of the many avenues that reparations sets forth for communities who are seeking to lead not just with words and good wishes but with actions, truth, and love.

How can we continue to make way to the truth telling that is already part of First Church's reckoning with its ties to slavery?

As communities of faith we need to see the spiritual and material sides of reparations and hold them close together.

Because reparations are way deeper than just writing a check or directing resources. And certainly, it is not much about the desire to have a close grip and control of the resources.

Reparations is about bringing healing, equality, dignity and recognizing that it is about having a debt that will never be repaid with just paper.

I truly love how Margaret Burnham a Lawyer and professor at Northeastern University Law school describes reparations in her book "By the Hands now known" to which she says:

**"Reparation is an interdependent bundle of gestures and practices that involve recognition, truth-telling, apology and payment owed to all victims"**

Burnham is giving us a definition that is not limiting in fact it is telling us that it is interdependent work. Meaning there is no way this is a work to be done alone or in a monologue.

Poet, activist, and writer Audre Lorde points out in her address titled : "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". That we cannot use the same tools of oppression to liberate the oppressed.

Lorde can help us see how we cannot assume that money alone will be the tool to bring healing when it was a tool that was used to oppress in the past. Now do not get me wrong, money is part of reparations but in order to reach an honest apology that leads to change- deep internal transformation needs to happen.

And what better place to talk about the importance of healing and love than here at church? Here we have stories and scripture that shape our life and faith, who call us to love our neighbors as our own, who call us to repair and heal.

Going back to the image in our passage. Do we really want to be the crowd blocking the way? I wonder what are some of the fears, biases, anxieties, or uncertainties- if any- that are blocking our way to fully embrace the need for the church to talk about reparations more often?

Can we build a culture of reparations among us? Can we bring visibility to the external systems and structures of white supremacy that are currently and actively set in place whose objective is to block the work of reparations in this country?

We do not need to answer these questions right away.

I would love to leave these questions as a continued work for further personal and day to day meditation. But to do so, we need to make space for these questions to be present.

And what about power?

Going back into our story we see an image of Jesus who feels power flow out of him, to which he stops and seeks.

Jesus knew he had somewhere to go but he stopped and sought and was not satisfied with the answer that his disciple gave to him. Jesus wanted to give visibility to who might have been ignored by the crowd.

And this is not to say that reparations is a work of white savior complex because to do so power still needs to be held and not given. However, in this story we see the mutual dignity shared with the woman who had the courage and whose spirit of witness brought her to speak up her truth about her healing. We see the dismantling of a crowd who furthered her invisibility and reclaim her deserved healing.

Because friends repair is not a one-way street as said before, it is not a charitable act. Our commitment to repair needs the flowing out and redirection of power transformed into justice and healing.

We can seek reparations because there has been a transformation of hidden narratives that are now known that shows us the damage that was done in the past and is still going on in our present.

We need to clear the way to reach healing on both ends in order to have eyes to see and ears to listen to see our place in the work of reparations.

Imagine this crowd, the irony of following Jesus and pressing against him focused on their own needs and ways ignoring whose healing they were blocking. It took Jesus's feet to stop and look around. I wonder how much time we have factored in our day to day to stop-and look around and stop sheltering the invisibility of injustice.

Finally, I want to underscore how reparations is not a new trend that we can hop on, this is not a "fast fashion" that will be overshadowed by the next trend.

Within this story in Mark we see that just as one receives justice, there is always another need of healing ahead. Right after Jesus healed this woman, he brought Jairus' daughter back to life.

My hope and my dream is for reparations to be a continued collective work of truth telling through history, monetary recompensation, and spiritual healing. I know that this can be built into a sustainable long-lasting culture for damage that cannot be erased.

I love the title of Burnham's book "By hands now known" because it gives the truth about previous stories of families whose stories of injustice are now known. Again, giving visibility is an act of repair and love.

Because what this story shows me is that the opposite of the work of love is indifference. And the opposite of truth telling is to opt for silence when you are sitting on a pile of truth.

Let us not be afraid of what that truth may expose because grief and sitting with discomfort is a step in the right direction to seek the healing and justice that is needed to repair.

My hope and dream is for those seeking to be part of the reparations movement to not get stuck in the “what now?” One step at a time is a good way to start. Knowing that this work requires time and sustainability.

And speaking of dreams... In light of Martin Luther King Jr. day tomorrow. I wanted to lift up Dr. King’s “I have a dream” line.

and I will close with this reflection of this famous, powerful, and transformative line of Dr. King.

The way I see this speech in connection to today is how Dr. King’s dreams are not just dreams for us now, they are responsibilities.

As current generations we need to carry these dreams into completion.

And in case we think that reparations is not one of these dreams, I want to also remember another not so famous line from Dr. King in another of his speeches where he talked about the many ways that the U.S. government monetarily oppressed African American communities, I will link the short clip to my sermon online<sup>1</sup> if you wish to see it. Dr. King ends his speech by saying and I quote,

“When we go into Washington in this campaign, we are coming to get our check”.

I see the truth telling and wholeness of Dr. King in both of these speeches where justice and reparations are not separate from having hopes, dreams, and a vision of love that requires reparations.

Friends as we continue to embrace the season of epiphany let us have our eyes open to the self-revealing truths that unravel on our day to day, whether that is in grand or small details.

Do not let things get in the way of that revelation, of that healing, furthermore let us not become those who block the ways for others to reach repair and healing.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLV5y4utPKI>

Most importantly let us not cave into this zero-sum mentality that is just leaving “the edge of the cloak” for others in fear that there is not enough-  
because the truth is there is enough-

I hope we can be truth tellers that can Let power go if we think we have been holding too tight to it or for too long.

because I wonder, if Jesus could let his power go and flow out of Him, what makes us think we have the right to hold on to power?

Let us make way for truth to be revealed and let us embrace an embodiment of witnesses who long to see repair and justice through the different avenues of truth telling, apology, and payment, because this is the work of love and integrity and I am looking forward to seeing the deep transformation that is coming ahead for I see hope among us.

