

## **The Dream Has a Name**

Sunday, January 15, 2023

Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz, Interim Senior Minister

Unity Church – Unitarian, Saint Paul, MN

This weekend our news media will be flooded with the annual replaying of one of the most famous speeches in American History. We will hear, in stirring and inspiring tones, Dr. King's *I Have a Dream Speech*. And I have to tell you that that speech still sends chills up my spine -and brings tears to my eyes – even after all these years. But lately, I've begun to turn my attention to what happens AFTER this weekend –when the cameras are off, when the speeches have ended, when the chill subsides and the tears are dried, America will return to its normal state of dis-ease. Some will return to business as usual, glad to have a day off of work. Some will be indifferent, and many, in deep denial – believing that America no longer needs to dream because racism ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Bill.

In Michael Eric Dyson's book, "I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King Jr." Dyson proposes that Americans listening to that speech all too often focus on the Dream and not the horrors that are a prelude to that Dream. Dyson writes that King intended that day not to simply detail a dream but to narrate a nightmare. <sup>1</sup>

So on this weekend, when we rightfully honor and acknowledge Dr. King's life and legacy, we must also explore what lay behind and what came after the "*I Have a Dream Speech*." As part of that exploration, I came across a speech that he delivered in Charleston, SC on July 30, 1967 – and the excerpt which you heard Russel Balenger read. That speech was in anticipation of the Poor People's March on Washington in 1968 that was on the top of King's agenda; one that he would not get to see fulfilled as he would be assassinated two months before the March was to begin.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dyson, Michael Eric. "I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, R." New York Times on the Web Book Review, 2014.

I Have a Dream was not only intended to stir the hearts and minds of a complacent America; its purpose was to lay a foundation for the immediate future.. In the speech you heard, King laid out in the starkest terms, what America owes the descendants of chattel slavery. In King's time, he foresaw the movement for civil rights expanding into a movement for economic equity These are fights we still have with us. But today we have new tools and new conversations to address the racialized economic disparities that continue to plague our nation. We still have a dream, but that dream has a new name and the name of that Dream - is Reparations.

I would imagine that most of us in this room or listening to this sermon online have some concept of reparations. Reparations, at its core, is about understanding and responding to harm. To make reparations starts first with an ability to acknowledge harm done and a willingness to address that harm – and there are a number of ways in which Reparations can occur.

I have turned to international law to find clear some clear definitions of what is involved in a process of reparation. There I found five areas of possibly remedy in a reparations process:

**“Restitution** – to restore a person or people to their original status; **Rehabilitation** – to address the physical and mental injuries inflicted upon the person or people; **Satisfaction** – the engagement of the affected persons or group in determining what is sufficient to repair the injury; **A Guarantee of non-repetition** - ending the behavior and put safeguards in place to ensure it doesn't happen again, and finally **Compensation** - to provide economic recompense for the value of exploited labor and materials.”

There are a lot of familiar questions that have arisen when the subject of reparations is raised for discussion in classrooms and in the halls of politics. Let's take on a couple of them. First - why single out African Americans when other groups have also suffered great harm at the hands of the United States? The answer is that one size of reparations does not fit all. America has had some precedent for reparations, with mixed results. Reparations were made to Japanese-Americans interned during World War II; and to people of color who survived police abuses in various cities. But not all of these reparations processes can be considered successful or

completed. After the Second World War, Congress created the Indian Claims Commission to pay compensation to any federally recognized tribe for land that had been seized by the United States. The commission paid the equivalent of less than \$1,000 for each Native American in the United States at the time the commission dissolved in 1978. The process was paternalistic and did not take into account that the theft of land and forced removal from the land requires not just monetary restorative justice, but restoration of their relationship with the land.

So, let me acknowledge that within the broad possibilities for conversations about reparations diverse communities of color, in this particular sermon I am focusing on Reparations for descendants of chattel slavery, also acknowledging that the issue of reparations for indigenous peoples and other communities of color that have suffered harm is still very much alive, important and related.

In 1967, when Dr. King proposed reparations prior to his Poor People's March on Washington, his remarks were buried in the more palatable rhetoric of his other speeches. In 1989, when Representative John Conyers first introduced House Bill 40 to create a commission to study reparations, it was soundly ignored. In 2014 when Ta-Neheshi Coates wrote "The Case for Reparations," for the Atlantic, he said his main objective was so that people would not laugh at the concept of Reparations. The good news is that as of 2021, there were 196 co-sponsors of federal House Bill 40 Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act. When passed, that Commission would identify (1) the role of the federal and state governments in supporting the institution of slavery, (2) forms of discrimination in the public and private sectors against freed slaves and their descendants, and (3) lingering negative effects of slavery on living African Americans and society. For the moment, that's where this proposal remains, always proposed, recently occasionally out of committee and waiting for a vote on the floor.

Despite the Democratic Party control of the House in the last Congress, we hear on both sides of the aisle the same arguments against reparations that come up again and again, and in the current Congress, there is little chance that anything will change. Let's look at those arguments for a moment,

**Reparations would be expensive and difficult to implement.** That’s true. Recent estimates cite that the cost to the US Government to implement appropriate reparations would be between 10 and 12 trillion dollars; roughly 800,000 for each eligible black household. Another study cites a number as high as 19 trillion, taking into account the amount of free and involuntary labor derived from millions of enslaved labor dating back to the United States inception.<sup>2</sup> Yet, we all know that the United States does prioritize spending based on politics or need. Since 9/11, the US has spent over 21 trillion on foreign and domestic militarization. The United States found money to support businesses and churches throughout the pandemic, monies which many of us needed and welcomed. Furthermore, there are financially viable models already proposed by how this could be implemented. Financial payouts could be divided between individual recipients and endowments created to develop the economic strength of the black community. Models of reparations from other countries could be studied; such as the reparations made to Holocaust survivors in Germany; or to victims of Human Rights Abuses under apartheid in South Africa. This is not rocket science; in fact, it’s probably less complicated and expensive than sending human beings into space.

**The second argument is that reparations would further divide the country along race lines.** This argument has been spoken by such diverse voices as Rep. Tom McClintock, R-California, who blasted H.R. 40 as a divisive attempt to set “neighbor against neighbor, American against American, solely on the basis of their race.” “You say this is healing?” he says. “It is precisely the opposite. It's designed to reach into the dead past, revive its conflicts, and then reproduce them into our age. I think all Americans of goodwill, regardless of their race, have had enough of this nonsense. So please stop. It's tearing our country apart.” Candidate for the Georgia’s US Senate Hershel Walker also opposed reparations along the same line. He wrote: “We use Black power to create white guilt, I feel it continues to let us know we're still African American, rather than just American. Reparation or atonement is outside the teaching of Jesus

---

<sup>2</sup> Darity & Mullen. “From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century,

Christ." So you recognize this as the same argument used against teaching about the realities of racism in America; that it's divisive; that we're all just Americans, not hyphenated?

I don't agree with Mr. McClintock or Walker, but rather with Ta-Nehesi Coates, who writes: "An America that asks what it owes its most vulnerable citizens is improved and humane," he wrote. "An America that looks away is ignoring not just the sins of the past but the sins of the present and the certain sins of the future. More important than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America's maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders."

**The third argument – and the one that I hear most commonly expressed by those who oppose the idea of reparations is that no one currently living is responsible for righting the wrongs committed by long dead slave owners.** Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has previously signaled opposition to the proposal, saying that he doesn't think "reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none of us currently living are responsible is a good idea. We've tried to deal with our original sin of slavery by fighting a civil war, by passing landmark civil rights legislation. We've elected an African American president," McConnell said. "I think we're always a work in progress in this country, but no one currently alive was responsible for that."

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Washington, in remarks directed at her GOP colleagues said, "You seem to really not get this." "Reparations are not about punishment but reparative justice. If you through your history benefited from that wrong that was done, then you must be willing to commit yourself to righting that wrong," she said.

Closer to home, I was having a conversation with a friend I have talked about in a sermon earlier this fall, whose political beliefs have swung far from our progressive and liberal college days. "I don't see the need for reparations," he said. "Show me the evidence." In the immediacy of the moment, I couldn't come up with a very complete response. Had I been a nimbler thinker, I may have said, Well, let's start with the Middle Passage, of 6-7 million human beings forcibly removed, two million not surviving that terrible journey. I might have said, well,

what about Auction blocks and family separations, Whippings, torture and human degradations, And what about George Washington who hunted Oney Judge; Or Sally Hemmings freedom – Jefferson never budged; There’s the Fugitive Slave Act and the Dred Scott Decision; And all claims for freedom met with derision. 40 Acres and a Mule – a noble plan; but Instead - Reconstruction, Carpet Baggers and The Ku Klux Klan; Jim Crow South - Separate not Equal - Plessy v. Ferguson – all that’s just the prequel; Bashing heads in Selma Alabama and the massacres in Tulsa, Rosewood and Atlanta? The Great Migration; Substandard education; Redlining and no equal pay brought more frustration. Voter suppression, poll tax, literacy tests, terror, intimidation; and more humiliation; Tuskegee Experiments and Henrietta Lacks – ‘Bama’s Bull Connor and dogs on children’s backs; What about Emmett Till or Virgil Ware; Addie, Cynthia, Carol, Denise McNair; Or Schwerner, Goodman, Cheney Jimmie Lee; Evers, Luizzo or James Reeb, And Dr. King.(pause)

But wait – there's more – and I’ve barely begun; beloved siblings who now will never see the sun; There's James Byrd and Jesse Washington; Eric Garner and Philando Castille; Breonna Taylor and Ahmad Arbury; There’s Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling and Freddy Gray Andre Hill and Daunte Wright; Atatiana Jefferson, Stephan Clark, Botham Jean, Tanisha Anderson and Tamir Rice; And those aren't all, I’m trying to be concise; Debts owned but never paid; Justice denied, and justice delayed; Cancelled stamped null and void; Ghettos created, neighborhoods destroyed; and On May 25, we all witnessed George Floyd.

Evidence? You ask. Evidence? You see – there is plenty of evidence for me. America owes a debt – a financial debt and spiritual debt to the descendants of slavery. And while yes, some Americans may be able to say “my ancestors didn’t have anything to do with slavery.” it’s obvious that all those who were not enslaved benefitted from the forced labor of the enslaved. The clothes that we wear, the food we eat, the water we drink, the transportation we use; all of it then – and even today – is based on an economic system of exploitation. It’s blood money that runs in our streets and high rises and office buildings and banks and stores and in international trade; its blood money tainted with this history and there must be a reckoning.

And so, when we speak of reparations, I am talking about money – and investments – and divestments – but I am also talking about a national moral reckoning. A national conversation about this country’s history – to face it openly and honestly – without flinching. For white Americans to feel the feelings of shame and guilt, of grief and loss; of disgust and despair and to come through them as part of this journey towards wholeness. It’s not unlike that creepy feeling you get when you know you’ve done somebody wrong, and you keep avoiding them, but when they finally confront you with the truth – though you may feel embarrassed, you also feel – a kind of relief. You don’t have to carry the shame and blame anymore. Our country could be made whole.

Let me be clear - such a national conversation would not eradicate racism or white supremacy, but it could be the beginning of the Great Turning of Reparative Justice. Coates said it best when he wrote: “Reparations, by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences – is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely.” Coates continues: “What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices – more than a handout, a payoff, hush money or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.”

This is big, I know. It’s almost too overwhelming to contemplate. That’s why the phrase, Think Global, Act Local still resonates with me. That’s why I’m encouraged that while HB 40 will be stuck on the House floor in Washington DC for two more years, there are communities around this country who are making significant inroads in reparations – and one of those communities is right here, in Saint Paul, MN. I want to commend City Council and Unity Church Member Jane Prince for her tireless work on getting the Ordinance to create a commission to study reparations a reality. Another Unity Church member, and worship associate Russel Balenger has been a part of this process so Russell, could you come forward and tell us a bit about what is happening in our own community – and, if you could share – something about what this means to you?