

“Repair & Reconcile”

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The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” and in response to white clergymen who at the time were vociferously denouncing the highly effective direct actions of the civil rights movement, states – “We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”¹

Prescient and obviously still very much relevant words from the prophet and pastor. I share them with you today to highlight how Dr. King understood racism as an unhealed wound. And the process of repairing that Dr. King was

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”
https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

calling us to engage in then, and now. This repairing work of keeping justice, and doing righteousness, has only just begun. We have a long road ahead of us. But the good news is that the road is not obscure. Albeit complex and layered. But not unclear. The other good news is that *our* good news as Christians, the gospel, is not obscure on reconciliation either, clearly decided on it as our ministry and work. The work of today. The work of dismantling white supremacy.

As a disclaimer, I am neither an expert or authority in reconciliation and anti-racism. As a white man I am not sure that expertise is ever a real possibility. However, despite my whiteness and maleness I do *practice* anti-racism in my daily life. And those practices I have learned directly from those who are experts. And those who I've had the privilege of listening to and learning from. From personal and professional relationships, personal and professional communities, I have learned to continually open my mind, my heart, and my spirit, so that I show up with my body in the ways that are needed. Now again, I am not claiming perfection in my execution of embodying anti-racism, far from it, but I do hold this work with me daily, knowing full well this journey of spiritual maturation will only be complete at the time of salvation. That is, the work of reconciliation *is not* about a one-time event or destination, but an ongoing process that is never fully

reached. And when understood this way, it very much mirrors the gospel in its articulation of spiritual telos, this ongoing process of maturation in our walk with God. I understand this mirroring synergy of spiritual maturation, and social maturation, as further confirmation that the two are inseparable. Intertwined. As in, our spiritual maturation and the depth to which we engage the good work of reconciliation go hand in hand, each contributing to each other's progression. As Christians, it goes without saying that we care for our spiritual lives deeply, we give attention to it, but not so on issues of justice. As the prophet Jeremiah warns his own audience, and as we are warned today, we have treated the wound of our neighbor carelessly, saying "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. Let us tend to the wound. Finally, and continually. As a part of this tending, I will offer a few points on the praxis of reconciliation. And while far from exhaustive or complete, it will hopefully be either affirming or enlightening to our gathering today.

First, reconciliation is an internal, personal process. This is where it starts. Where it continues. And where it ends at the day of our own salvation. It is lifelong in this sense. It is a process of rooting out the white supremacy within us. A cleaning of the wound. An exorcising of the demons of racism that lie dormant

and unconscious. Or for some, very much active and conscious. Either way it is often a painful reckoning of one's sins, whether direct or indirect, intended, or unintended, born of ignorance or willfulness. It is most definitely an examination of one's actions and our complicity in the actions of others, or the actions of the state. It is an honest accounting of our inaction when action was needed, or silence when witness was required. Or absence amidst calls for solidarity. And this is not about guilt. That doesn't help and centers the wrong people. And it isn't about saviorism. We already have a savior. But rather it is about taking account, it is about honesty with ourselves, with others, with God. It is about setting things right. And it is a taking responsibility to do our own deep work in un-propagandizing our minds and spirits. Because indeed we have been taught these things, many times, and many times intentionally.

It is an intellectual process of unlearning. And learning again. For instance, I used to believe with confidence that everyone's station in life was based on their hard work and talents, including my own. And to be sure, I work hard, and I like to think I'm relatively talented, but I know many people who work harder. Many who are more talented. Yet those same people are not in the spaces I've been privileged to occupy. It is an emotional process of letting these parts of ourselves die. There can be grief in this dying. And yet Jesus does tell us to pluck out our

own eye, or else have our entire body thrown into the fire. And of note you will lose more than these parts. You will lose people in this work as well. Again, Jesus does tell us he has not come to bring peace, but a sword. To set family members against family members. Perhaps more than anything it is a spiritual process, as our spirits themselves must be repaired. The Spirit is very much involved. And it will convict you if you allow it. Not everyone has ears to hear though. Not everyone walks the path of reconciliation that Christ entrusts us with. That Christ *relies* on us to embody. To *be* the righteousness of Christ. We are to *keep* justice. With us. *Within* us. We are to *do* righteousness. To *be* righteousness.

Second. Reconciliation is an external, collective process. It *must* go far beyond personal reflection, repentance, and transformation. If it stays only internal, it risks becoming self-serving and a balm to make oneself feel good about injustice. Rather than *keeping* justice and *doing* righteousness. And while the wound needs individual attention, it is within and amongst the collective where it festers. Where it ultimately needs to be healed. Where repairing needs to be much more tangible. Where repairing means *reparations* for the Black community. Where repairing means giving the land back to Indigenous peoples. Where repairing means caring about and finding the scores of missing and

murdered indigenous women and girls. Where repairing means just and humane reception of our Black and Brown neighbors fleeing deadly situations in intentionally destabilized countries. All this repairing and *much, much* more needs to happen before reconciliation is ever possible. And reconciliation is our ministry given to us by Christ himself! It is our work.

Last summer, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and many others, Womanist Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas made a strong biblical case for the church's direct responsibility for reparations, building on the legacy of civil rights leader James Forman's Black Manifesto of 1969, which he delivered by disrupting service at Riverside Church in Manhattan, naming the direct culpability the church has had in maintaining and furthering white supremacy.² I give a bit of this history to illustrate how long the church has *already* had to contemplate their responsibility in this work. And of course, it extends before that moment as well. We are far past time for deliberating. It is time for action. The Reverend Dr. Brown Douglas summarizes the task for faith communities well, stating that "reparations must not be only an effort to compensate for past harms, they must also chart a pathway to a just future."³ Rather than prescribing form to

² Kelly Brown Douglas, "A Christian Call for Reparations," *Sojourners*. <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2020/christian-call-case-slavery-reparations-kelly-brown-douglas>.

³ Brown Douglas, "A Christian Call for Reparations."

reparations for the Black community, she cites three key aspects in which they must address in their deployment. First, it must begin with “anamnestic truth-telling ... confronting the ways in which ecclesial and institutional systems, structures, and cultural norms reflect white supremacist narratives, ideologies, and constructs – then intentionally working to dismantle and transform them.”⁴ Second, it must be concerned with “fostering a moral identity” that “self-consciously name(s) and intentionally denounce(s) white privilege.”⁵ Third, the Rev. Dr. Brown Douglas states reparations from a faith community perspective must be about “proleptic participation,” that is, to act “as if the future is now,” through being “an active presence in the public square as sanctuary and witness.” She quotes Dr. King’s admonishment that “faith communities do not have the option ... to remain ‘silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.’”⁶

And this is *just* speaking to us as church. Not us as citizens of this country. Or as neighbors in our communities. And while Brown Douglas is speaking here to reparations for the Black community, these aspects can be applied to reconciling all the sins that whiteness has wrought on our world. There is definitely more to

⁴ Brown Douglas, “A Christian Call for Reparations.”

⁵ Brown Douglas, “A Christian Call for Reparations.”

⁶ Brown Douglas, “A Christian Call for Reparations.”

name here. But we do not have enough light in the day to address it all here this Sunday. What *can* be said right now is that calls for reconciliation without the fulfillment of comprehensive reparations for the myriad of wounds, are nothing but perpetuations of white supremacy. It is the definition of treating the wound carelessly, saying “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace. Isaiah tells us clearly, we are to keep justice, and do righteousness. Until the day of salvation. Paul tells us that day is now. That the work of reconciliation is ours to live out in the name of Christ.

Which brings me to my third and final point on reconciliation. The point that it is *firmly* biblical. From the Hebrew Prophets to the Gospel of Christ we are *clearly and unequivocally* called to do this work. For the Gospel itself embodies reconciliation. Proclaims reconciliation as its mission. Names it as our ministry. Given to us through Christ! The prophet Isaiah tells us to keep justice, and do righteousness, because salvation is soon and in its coming, God’s righteousness will be revealed. Paul, some 800 years later, tells us this righteousness is the work of reconciliation as those in covenant with Jesus. He also tells us that now is the day of salvation. Now, is the time for the work. 2000 years after Paul, the work of reconciliation is the work of anti-racism. Of decolonization. As such, the

Gospel itself is anti-racist and decolonial. This is the good news we must embody. This is the good news we must proclaim as Christians authentically walking the path of Jesus. And this good news is clear. It is clear that this work is *the work of reconciliation*. It is clear about the now-ness of the work. It is clear there will be trials and tribulations along the way. It is clear our collective salvation is wrapped up in reconciliation. And if careless with the wound, if it is left unrepaired, reconciliation is impossible. And our salvation is at risk. And finally, it is clear that there are no restrictions in the affections of truth-tellers we must listen to, whom being Black and Brown, being people of the global majority, are those often caught under the wheels of injustice and understand the work at a different level. A level that someone like myself, although committed to being an accomplice to the work, can never really know. The best I can do is follow. The best I can do is be in right relationship. The best I can do, the best many of us can do, is open our hearts, become aware of those restrictions in *our own* affections, continually root them out, and then move our feet in commitment to the work of repairing and reconciling.

I want to close our time together today with a poem titled “what is unveiled? the founding wound,” by Adrienne Maree Brown, whom in the wake of

the January 6th white supremacist attack on our democracy, wrote the following

words:

a body is always a body
individual or collective
(whole or in many pieces)
alive or, later, dead
a body is always vulnerable

a wound is always a wound
singular and deep
or many cuts, slowly, blood everywhere
left untreated, unstaunched, denied
a wound will always fester

the first wound happens within
the violence of birth
the expulsion from the illusion of safety
from the idea that someone (else)
will do all the labor

and some of us keep looking everywhere
for placenta, for mothering
for acceptance of our worst choices
to be told we are so special
to be named a favorite child

some of us learn to work
we are given tools, lectures, practices
we are given the blessing of knowing
that work to nourish the collective
is a sacred path for our lives

some are only taught to eat
given the title to land that isn't ours

judged for the speck of dirt under our nails
set to race against even our own kin
for the neverending victory of more

some of us are black
still nauseous from the boat's hold
still catching our breath from snapped ropes
still oiling our calloused field hands
and still wounded

some of us are white
still synonymous with impossible purity
still given no songs from the earth
still taught to master nothing but superiority
and still, wounded

some of us are red, yellow, brown
still made to feel tertiary to the plot
still dismissed for all we remember
still claiming we are human, not terrorist
and, still wounded

some of us are never surprised
never apoplectic when the stench hits us
what rots at the core is known, documented
it is tangible, moral, American, spiritual
it is the founding wound

gray only at the surface
brittle black where the injury began
a rainbow of bruising everywhere
green mold making life in dying flesh
but the pus, the pus bursts white

we are well past the age of turning inwards
of seeing the open wounds on our souls

of stepping into our shadows with truth light
of seeing we were shaped, and can change
of believing the wound is who we are

we know the smell of decay on breath
we see the swollen cracking flesh of infection
it is not rude to acknowledge the stink
to wonder if it is viral, venom, survivable
to look for the laceration(s)

things are not getting worse
they are getting uncovered
we must hold each other tight
and continue to pull back the veil
see: we, the body, we are the wounded place

we live on a resilient earth
where change is the only constant
in bodies whose only true whiteness
is the blood cell that fights infection
and the bone that holds the marrow

remove the shrapnel, clean the wound
relinquish inflammation, let the chaos calm
the body knows how to scab like lava stone
eventually leaving the smooth marring scars
of lessons learned:

denial will not disappear a wound

the wound is not the body

a body cannot be divided into multiple living entities (what us will go on
breathing?)

the founder's wound is the myth of supremacy

this is not the first wound, or the last

we are a species before we are a nation, and after

warriors, organizers, storytellers, dreamers – all of us are healers

the healing path is humility, laughter, truth, awareness and choice

a scab is a boundary on territory, between what is within and what is without,
when the line has been breached

stop picking at the scab, it slows the healing

until we are dead, and even when we are exhausted and faithless, we fight for life

we are our only relevant hope
we are our only possible medicine

a body is always a body
wounded, festering, healing, healed
we choose each day what body we will shape
with the miraculous material we're gifted
let us, finally, attend to the wound
let us, finally, name the violence
let us, finally, break the cycle of supremacy
let us, finally, choose ourselves whole
let us, finally, love ourselves
whole.⁷

May it be so. Amen.

⁷ Adrienne Maree Brown, "what is unveiled? the founding wound. (poem/directive)."
<http://adriennemareebrown.net/2021/01/>.