

Introduction

I love bargains and good deals. I'd rather say, I got this shirt for five dollars instead of fifteen dollars. I had a math professor who also did accounting for a large retail company. She explained the markup of products looked to cover production, distribution, marketing, maintaining and running the multiple retail stores, and profit. The retail price will cover the cost of the product explained. Big box stores will still make money from sale and clearance items based on the markup of the product. It made sense why big box stores could have black friday or other deals.

Recently there was a granny square crochet sweater that Target was selling for \$35. It seems like a good deal. Local artisans explained how there is no industrial machine that can replicate or reproduce a crochet pattern. There are industrial machines that can replicate knitting patterns but not a crochet granny square pattern. The only way to make a crochet sweater for \$35 will be paying a person less than or about a dollar an hour for them to create it by hand and for Target to still make a profit. The artisans said it would take roughly three days working 8 hour work days to complete the sweater by hand.

In America, we have minimum wages, but this does not apply to items that are outsourced to other areas of the world. So was this garment ethically made?

Handmade items are different. People don't realize the amount of work and materials it takes to create something handmade. We are not accustomed to paying for handmade items. When big box stores put something on clearance and still turn a profit, that's great. But I don't like the feeling of wearing something I know was made by a person who wasn't paid a living wage.

I've heard stories of people traveling to places like Mexico and will bargain with the person to get items as cheaply as possible. These stories have come from people going there for vacation and even for ministry trips.

These two instances are examples of an abuse or injury that has been caused. Sure, you could justify capitalism and consumption. Maybe we don't fully realize the effects we have on people's livelihood. We didn't make the decisions for the large retail company. What harm does fast fashion have on people, communities, and the environments we don't have firsthand, day to day contact with?

Whether buying a handmade item for way too cheap at Target or on vacation, a lot of us don't give it a second thought. We certainly don't feel guilty. I guess local seller shouldn't have caved for the lower price as well. That's not our problem.

We live in a world of economic injustice. It's hard for us to know how to make that right. I've heard of other people who, rather than haggling with that seller on vacation, will pay the amount asked or more because they know the amount of work and limited resources many of the local sellers face. They ensure the local seller is paid a decent amount plus more for their work.

We might call this act a reparation. The person in this example did not take advantage of the seller. They're making amends on behalf of another person's harmful act - probably someone they don't even know.

Reparation. Concrete acts of restitution and recompense. Reparations are a deeply spiritual act. God cares about economic justice... So what does it look like for us to care as well? Today we are going to explore the concrete ways God leads us to act out love for our neighbor.

Sermon

Today is the third Sunday of Lent, which is a season of transformation. In Epiphany, we asked who God is and saw that God is the one who lives in solidarity with us, calling and equipping us to be God's images in the world.

Lent is the chance for us to prepare for that calling. It's a way for us to take time together to look inside ourselves and do some careful introspection, to ask as a community where we are not prepared to embark on God's call together.

This year, our series is called "God is Not..." This is a technique to know God that originated with the theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his masterwork *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas wrote,

"We cannot know what God is, only what [God] is not. We must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than the ways in which [God] does." — Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

That sounds strange, I know, but it's Aquinas' attempt to take seriously the command not to create idols of God. God is infinite and beyond our comprehension - what theologians like Aquinas call a mystery. But we constantly create pictures of God - pictures that are false. Pictures that do more harm than good.

Like Michelangelo carving the David, we're carving away the things God is not as a way to see more clearly the divine mystery that is God. As we see what God is not, we are more clearly able to confess our participation in those things and turn from them.

We began by confessing that God is beyond us - unknowable except where God chooses to be known. We faced our own propensity to play God. Tim challenged us to refuse the god of money. Today, we're exploring how money is tied to justice, and how the people of God engage that truth.

A few weeks ago we read Jeremiah 1 and considered what this passage looks like as a collective reading. It is important to remember Jeremiah's individual calling in relation to God's work of bringing about newness to God's people. Like prophets, some of you are better at helping people to lament and cry out in this difficult time. Some of you are better at helping bring about inspiration. Whatever your role is in the communities you are part of, as a disciple of Christ, does your spoken and lived out witness bear the testimony of a God who wants to redeem, restore, and reconcile all of creation and humanity back to him?

Today we continue the journey exploring our lived out life as a disciple of Christ and how the act of reparation bears the testimony of a God who wants to redeem, restore, and reconcile all of creation and humanity back to him. What is reparation? The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines reparation as, "a repairing or keeping in repair; the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury; something done or given as amends or satisfaction and lastly, the **payment** of damages." Reparation is addressing injustice in a tangible way. There is the image called Lady Justice that is common to see in the United States Court of Law. One of the symbols Lady Justice holds is a scale which represents the process of justice and weighing evidence. The idea behind the empirical weighing scale and Lady Justice being blindfolded is that justice would be fairly restored. Reparation requires an intentional response of correcting a moral offense against another person. Wealth gained by acts of oppression and exploitation of the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable are examples of wrong and sinful acts that require reparation.

Turn with us to Number 5:5-10.

The beginning of the book of numbers provides a birds eye view of the people of Israel. The people's identity is as the priestly and holy people of God. The people are organized by tribes. God is placed at the center and God's presence is mediated through the tabernacle and priests.

The importance of holiness for all the people is to acknowledge God's vision and identity for the people. Numbers 5 transitions to provide detail of how the holy people of God are to live out an ethical life. The laws that we read are specific. Numbers 5:5-10 addresses sin and righteousness. In order for the people of Israel to maintain God's blessing and shalom, they must be cleansed of sin.

Let's read Numbers 5 collectively - as a text addressed not to individuals, but a community. And let's keep that image of reparations close at hand.

Read with me Numbers 5:5-10.

“Then the Lord spoke to Moses: ‘Tell the Israelites, ‘When a man or a woman commits any sin that people commit, thereby breaking faith with the Lord, and that person is found guilty, then he must confess his sin that he has committed and must make full reparation, add one-fifth to it, and give it to whomever he wronged. But if the individual has no close relative to whom reparation can be made for the wrong, the reparation for the wrong must be paid to the Lord for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement by which atonement is made for him. Every offering of all the Israelites’ holy things that they bring to the priest will be his. Every man’s holy things will be his; whatever any man gives the priest will be his.’” Numbers 5:5-10 (New English Translation)

The word of the Lord.

The New Revised Standard Version and New Living Translation use the word restitution in place of reparation. Restitution is defined from the same dictionary as, “an act of restoring or a condition of being restored: such as a restoration of something to its rightful owner, a making good of or giving an equivalent for some injury; and lastly, a legal action serving to cause restoration of a previous state.”

Reparation and restitution are synonyms. Reparation and restitution both mean to repair or restore while giving justice or satisfaction for the wrong done.

The individual reading of the text addresses what a person must do to repair what has been broken. You messed up. What has occurred has hurt you and another person or group of people. Not only that, it has affected how you interact with God. By breaking faith, your spiritual practices have changed, maybe you don't want to pray anymore, you feel so far away from God, Creator. Others know what you did and you are completely in the wrong. Now the only thing you can do is make things right. You have to admit to what you did, make amends, offer a guilt offering to the person or people you have wronged, plus a little bit more. After all has been settled, you can now atone for what you did wrong before God.

Why all this? This passage tells of the interpersonal relationships we have with one another.

To put in context how reparation might look. Once my dad ate his granddaughter's leftover food. She was about eight years old. We came back from a day at Legoland. My parents/ her grandparents stayed at my home. My niece went to the fridge and her food was gone. She asked

her grandparents who ate it and both denied eating her food. She was looking forward to her food and was crying that it was gone. Finally, her grandpa admitted to eating her food. He felt so bad he made her cry, he took everyone out to dinner at his granddaughter's choice of restaurant and gave her \$20 on top of everything. At dinner, my niece prayed for the meal and asked God to forgive her grandpa for lying and stealing. The tear in the relationship between grandfather and granddaughter was first restored. The tear in the relationship between grandfather and God was then restored.

Another example of reparation comes from the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector who had a lot of money that was gained by cheating and exploiting his community. Zacchaeus' wealth was gained by taking from his neighbors. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus and climbs a tree for a better view over the crowd. Jesus spots Zacchaeus, instructs him to climb down and he is going to stay in his home. Zacchaeus was happy to open his home to Jesus. **“Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’”** (Luke 19:7, NRSV) The text explains “everyone” is not happy that Jesus is going to Zacchaeus' house. “Everyone” called Zacchaeus a sinner. Zacchaeus is a very rich chief tax collector and has broken the relationship with the people in the community he was part of. He has used his position for financial gain. Zacchaeus is responsive to Jesus and went through great lengths to see him. **“Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone. I repay them four times as much.’”** (Luke 19:8, NRSV) Zacchaeus' response of “I give” and “I repay” is in the present tense and announces a new practice that will begin now to correct his past and how he will go forward with his community.

The complete and sudden change of Zacchaeus reveals his repentance of his abusive use of power and exploits towards the community he wronged. Jesus then approves the steps Zacchaeus takes of settling his injustice he has done of giving half of his wealth to the poor and repaying back four times as much of the people he wronged. Jesus' response to Zacchaeus, **“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”** (Luke 19:9-10, NRSV) Zacchaeus' relationship is now restored with God. Jesus tells the crowd that Zacchaeus is no longer a “sinner” and what he has done is a true act of repentance. Jesus communicates to the people that Zacchaeus has changed the environment of injustice and restores Zacchaeus back into the community. Zacchaeus is brought back to the salvation promised by God.

Jesus does not tell Zacchaeus what to do in restoring his relationship with his community. Zacchaeus makes the decision to divide his wealth to care for the poor in his community and provide compensation to the people that were affected by his harmful and unfair financial dealings. When we look at Numbers 5:5-10 again, the type of sacrifice required was a guilt offering. The “guilt” the person has is the result of their wrongdoing. The wrongdoer gives restitution because of a relationship broken with the person who was wronged. The guilt offering

is connected with a sin and purification offering because the individual and relationships between the individual, community, and with God are desecrated. The only way the wrongdoer can correct and atone all that has been desecrated is first to correct the broken relationship between the individual and community before they can come and worship God. The people of Israel understood that an individual's uncleanliness can affect the whole community and separate them from the presence of God who dwells with them.

Zacchaeus corrects what has been broken by the display of a free and loving giving that is not based on laws, practice of tithing, or almsgiving. Zacchaeus knows that he unjustly acquired his wealth and is willing to correct the wrong. Love and justice for neighbors are connected.

The people of Israel knew the path of God. What we know as the Ten Commandments is where God spoke the words of how the relationship with one's neighbor should be. **"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."** (Exodus 20:16-17, NRSV) Exodus 22 and Leviticus 19 also provides social and religious laws for the people of Israel to follow in regards to one's neighbors. **"You shall not defraud your neighbor."** (Leviticus 19:13, NRSV) **"When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another."** (Leviticus 25:14, NRSV) The call for reparation is a call to heal the rupture in a relationship. Wrongs against the neighbor fractures the relationship. As long as our relationship with our neighbors is fractured, we can't have a whole relationship with God. They are two sides of the same coin. This is what God told the Israelites at Sinai. This is what Jesus showed us in his ministry. And it's what we see in our society today.

Reparation is repairing broken and fractured relationships. It is more than a, "I'm sorry." I shared the story of my dad stealing his granddaughter's food. He admitted his wrongdoing to his granddaughter and did his part to atone for his sin. His granddaughter forgave him and prayed for God's forgiveness of what was done. Interpersonal relationships with the people of Israel are woven in with them being God's holy people. Today, each and every one of us are connected or joined together through Christ. Atonement of sin towards neighbor and God fits into God's work towards redemption, restoration, and reconciliation.

Reparation is tied to bringing to light injustice and correcting the injustice. Reparation is also correcting corporate injustice. Reparation is making amends of illegal financial gain, abuse of power, exploits and oppression of vulnerable communities. Reparation is repairing, making amends, and restoring a sense of community. The first act of reparation is not forgetting the injustice done towards one's neighbor. There is a vulnerability to relinquish pride and power so that we can discover what has been done to hurt people's lives. We need to know the people and community to discover what practices and patterns have been abusive, offensive, and harmful. PayDay loans, pawn shops, plasma centers are more often found in lower socioeconomic

communities. Zacchaeus could be a modern PayDay loan guy who further oppresses a community of people who are already financially struggling and go to him because that's the last resort. Zacchaeus as a PayDay loan guy acknowledges his unfair financial practices and agrees to not only give away half his money but also pay back four times the money he took from high interests he charged on his loans.

Imagine land that you, your family, your community has lived on being forcibly taken away. Come to find out that land was freely given claim to that land you once called home.

Reparation has deep roots in the christian tradition. The act of restoring broken relationships and bringing about genuine healing is part of practicing confession of the wrongful sinful acts. We are called to bring forward the solidarity we as Christians should have together through and because of Jesus.