ZACCHAEUS AND THE CALL TO REPAIR:
A Sermon on Luke 19:1-10

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If you were to stroll down 9th Street through the Shaw neighborhood, you'd eventually come across a modest but noteworthy memorial. There at the center, a large bronze sculpture of Carter G. Woodson sits atop a circular stone platform. And to the right, for those who are unfamiliar with Dr. Woodson's life and work, a large inscription reads: FATHER OF BLACK HISTORY. Woodson was a historian, author, and educator. He taught here in the District of Columbia for many years at M Street High School, Armstrong High School, and Howard University. But he's best known as the founder of Negro History Week, the precursor to Black History Month, which, as you know, begins this week. Deeply concerned about the erasure of Black history in America, Woodson labored to ignite what he described as a Black history "mass education movement." In 1922, he explained his goals for that movement with these words:

> We are going back to that beautiful history, and it is going to inspire us to greater achievements. It is not going to be long before we can so sing the story to the outside world as to convince it of the value of our history and our traditions, and then we are going to be recognized as men.[1]

I wonder what you heard in that quote. Two things stand out to me. The first is that the focus of this movement is *beauty*. Beautiful history. Beautiful ancestry. Beautiful traditions. Beautiful community. Black History Month isn't centrally about lamenting the ugliness of racism. It's about "singing the story" of Black image-bearing excellence and glory. It's about *beauty*. Well-meaning non-Black folks, in particular, need to keep this in mind. A second observation about Dr. Woodson's vision: Black History Month is a conscious response to a deficit—the absence of Black recognition. A nation must be reeducated. Lies must be confronted. True stories must be retold. In fact, rightly understood, Black History Month is itself a form of reparations—the repair of collective memory. A line from the HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* comes to mind: "Every lie we tell incurs a debt to truth." Beloved, a generational debt to truth—the truth about Black life in America—still remains to be repaid.

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So, we've taken a stroll down 9th Street and arrived at a fork in the road called reparations. This morning I'd like to examine this important subject with you, and I'd like to do that through the lens of the story of Zacchaeus from Luke 19. Whether you're skeptical of reparations or fully on board, I pray you will come to see that the basic moral logic of reparations is firmly rooted in Scripture. What I mean is this. Reparations is, in

some ways, a *complex* topic. Questions abound: who, what, when, where, how? But lying at the heart of reparations is a surprisingly *simple* idea, an imperative that the Bible clearly teaches: When you steal something, repentance and love require you to return it. We expect even our dear, petty-thieving, preschool-aged children to understand this simple principle, do we not? *Give it back,* we tell them. *If you took something that doesn't belong to you, you have to give it back.* What, then, is the right moral response to the racist generational robbery of African Americans? Again, I ask, how should Christians, in particular, respond to the systematic theft of the identities, agency, and prosperity of our Black siblings and neighbors? *Give it back.* Repair. Reparations.

To unpack this further, we turn to Luke 19:1-10.[2] At the heart of this narrative is the life-changing kindness of Jesus. The king of grace once again shows off his wonderful habit of befriending all the "wrong" people. In this case, it's a tax collector. In every case, it's people like you and me, people desperate for God's better-than-we-deserve, superlative favor. By including this story, Luke seems especially intent on demonstrating that the rich and the socially marginal (as a tax-collector, Zacchaeus represents both) can enter the kingdom of God. Like the blind beggar in the previous chapter, they too can come to "*see*" Jesus and the wonder of his love (18:41, 42, 43; 19:3, 4). Poor house, rich house, frat house, drug house, your house, my house—salvation can come to *any* house. Hallelujah! And as we read about Zacchaeus' response to the saving-kindness of Jesus, we learn a few things about repairing past wrongs. Three lessons about the work of repair: its *premise,* its *practice,* and its *power*. Let's examine each of these in turn, beginning with the premise of repair.

The Premise of Repair

What is the work of repair a response to? What makes reparations necessary in the first place? It's *theft*. The call to repair presupposes that something has been sinfully taken. What career-long sin does Zacchaeus confess in verse 8? *Sykophanteō.* Extortion. Zacchaeus was a *thief*. All Jewish tax collectors in ancient Palestine were. It's the reason why they were so "wealthy" (v. 2). And it's why they were so viscerally despised and condemned as "sinners" (v. 7). It was bad enough that tax collectors like Zacchaeus allied themselves with the occupying Roman regime—*traitors!* But it was worse still that they regularly overcharged the people in order to line their own pockets—*thieves!* And they often did so with physical force, violence, and insatiable greed. That's why Philo of Alexandria in the first century described tax collectors as "the most ruthless of men, brimful of inhumanity."[3] Never mind what that old Sunday school song seems to suggest: Zacchaeus wasn't just an innocent, bumbling, "wee little man." He was a pitiless agent of an extractive imperial system. He was a plundering predator.

Theft. Robbery. Extraction. Greed. Plunder. This is the vocabulary we should use when talking about the evils of racism and white supremacy in America. Why? Many people act as if racism is little more than a problem of hurt feelings and strained relationships. So, they'll speak of people being "offended," and they'll casually gesture toward the vice of "division." But, no: White supremacy *extorts*. Racism *robs.* These are gross violations of the Eighth Commandment: *You shall not*—what? *Steal* (Ex 20:15; Luke

18:20). Journalist and author Ta-Nehisi Coates has said it well: "When we think of white supremacy, we picture COLORED ONLY signs, but we should picture pirate flags."[4] Racism isn't just about hateful ideas that need to be renounced, or divided neighbors that need to be reconciled, or corrupt institutions that need to be reformed, but robbed communities that need to be repaid.

Beloved, we must reckon with a haunting fact of history: The 400-year story of Black people in America is a story of systematic plunder on repeat.

Bodies—*stolen.*
Agency—*stolen.*
Wages—*stolen.*
Public image—*stolen.*
Sexual sanctity—*stolen.*
Land—*stolen.*
Education—*stolen.*
Membership in Christ's church—yes, *stolen.*
Home ownership—*stolen.*
Voting rights—*stolen.*
Generational wealth—*stolen.*
Freedom to drive, jog, sleep, or even pray without fear of being lynched—*stolen.*

Stolen all! God have mercy. How should we react to this catalog of horrors? Don't just acknowledge the facts of it. Weep over it. Weep over it! Not only because we are speaking about the pillaging of real people, real flesh and blood, but also because it's impossible to see the moral necessity, urgency, and beauty of reparations except through tears.

I suspect that reframing racism as a kind of theft may be new for some of you. But this is, in fact, an old point of view, one that Black Christians have voiced for hundreds of years. Bishop Richard Allen declared, "We were stolen from our mother country." Frederick Douglass condemned enslavers as "a band of successful robbers." Maria Stewart said of consumers of slave labor, "we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruit of them." Martin Luther King Jr. preached that Jim Crow segregation was "stripping millions of Negro people of their sense of dignity and robbing them of their birthright of freedom." What's more, these witnesses declared that these thefts were animated not finally by hate but by avarice and greed. Angelina Grimké condemned slavery as a "grand temple built to Mammon." Sojourner Truth thundered, "Our nerves and sinews, our tears and blood, have been sacrificed on the altar of this nation's avarice." Henry Highland Garnet denounced the chattel system, saying, "no cruelty is too great, no villainy and no robbery too abhorrent for even enlightened men to perform, when influenced by avarice and lust."[5]

Theft fueled by greed—are we learning to see what these saints saw? Not only in the pages of history but even today in the streets of our city? Beloved, look around—what do you see? The premise of reparations is that a mass, multigenerational campaign of theft has brutalized Black America. When we begin to perceive this reality, what should we then do? What, according to the Bible, is a moral response to theft? This brings us to our second lesson: the *practice* of repair.

The Practice of Repair

Deeply moved by the mercy of Jesus, Zacchaeus renounces his former way of life. He stands, almost as if to make a public vow, and he declares in verse 8: "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Zacchaeus openly acknowledges his life of theft. He admits his guilt, yes, but he doesn't stop there. He pledges to redress his wrongs. He will *pay back* all that he had stolen from his neighbors—fourfold, in fact. He will offer reparation. Will we?

Too often after wounding others, we might eek out an apology, but really what we want is to move forward and move on—and *quickly*. The sight of blood on our hands is, perhaps, too much to bear. But festering wounds must be healed, not forgotten or ignored. As Ralph Ellison wrote in his novel *Juneteenth*: "Blood spilled in violence doesn't just dry and drift away in the wind, no! It cries out for restitution, redemption."[6] Love perceives that cry, the voice of Abel's blood from the ground (Gen. 4:10). Love peels our gaze off ourselves and sees, at last, the ones we've hurt—the ones we've robbed. Love eagerly desires the undoing of wounds. (This is just what we mean by repair: the *undoing* of wounds, the *unwounding* of wounds.) Many will acknowledge the generational thefts named earlier, but they'd still rather roll a tombstone over the carnage and move on. Friends, love seeks not burial but resurrection. Healing. Repair. Zacchaeus began to understand this. Zacchaeus began to love like this. Will we?

At this point, a few questions or objections may come to people's minds. Someone might say: "Well, good for Zacchaeus. That was his choice. But I don't think I'm on the hook to copy what he did." Actually, friends, we are. In returning the things he stole, Zacchaeus wasn't being nice. He wasn't being charitable. He was being obedient to Scripture. Zacchaeus was actually following the requirements of Exodus 22 and Leviticus 6 and Numbers 5, which say of those who are guilty of theft: "they must return what they have stolen or taken by extortion" and "give it all to the owner" (Lev 6:4, 5). In short, they "must make full restitution" (Num 5:7). Our Christian forbears—from Augustine to Aquinas to Calvin to Wesley—all saw this practice of restitution as a duty required by the Eighth Commandment. It was plain to them, and it should be to us (and our toddlers): if you steal something, you have to give it back. You *must*.

Another person might push back in a different way: "But isn't it enough to say you're sorry?" Don't be mistaken: Numbers 5 requires repentant thieves to "*confess* the sin they have committed" (v. 7). But these same passages *also* require them to "return" what they've stolen (Lev 6:4). Both are necessary—are they not? Suppose I stole your bike and got caught. Would it be enough for me just to confess my theft? Of course not. I'd also need to *return* the bike—*your* bike! Now imagine I said to you, "I'm sorry I took your bike. But, um, can I *keep* it?" You'd not only reply, "Are you kidding me? No!" You'd also question the sincerity of my apology, and rightly so. Listen, our nation has refused to relinquish its stolen bikes. And we rightly question the sincerity of its muffled apologies and shrugs. But look over here, something quite different: Zacchaeus. Confession, restitution—he does it all. And Jesus endorses it all: "Today *salvation* has come to this house!" (v. 9). Zacchaeus's sincere, Spirit-wrought repentance is revealed in his

commitment to the obligations of repair. Is it enough to say you're sorry? Beloved, true repentance repairs what was ripped and returns what was ripped off.

Now, a third objection might sound like this: "OK, maybe African Americans have been robbed. But *I* didn't do it. I shouldn't have to repair a mistake that I didn't make." Let me respond in two ways. First, every person in this country has benefited, whether directly or indirectly, from the plunder of African American people. So it stands to reason that every person is implicated in these historical thefts, even if they are not personally to blame for them. We all, as beneficiaries of injustice, bear responsibility to repair the damage that's been done. Second, according to Numbers 5, if the party to which restitution is owed has deceased, the stolen items must still be returned. To whom? To the next of kin, a "close relative" (v. 8), whomever would have received those goods by way of inheritance. In other words, the duty of reparation doesn't magically disappear with the death of the original perpetrators; rather, *it passes on to their descendants* so long as they remain in possession of the ill-gotten goods. To modify the scenario mentioned earlier: If your grandfather gives you a bike he stole, you must return it even if you didn't steal it. Job 20 appeals to this exercise of generational responsibility when it warns the wicked man who has "oppressed the poor" and "seized houses he did not build" (v. 19). On a future day of reckoning, we're told, "his children must make amends to the poor; his own hands must give back his wealth" (v. 10). Friends, we are those children. The thefts of white supremacy are an inextricable part of our American inheritance. And today is that day of reckoning.

Let me put it another way. Those who insist, "I should have nothing to do with reparations because I never owned any slaves," or, "because I didn't personally obstruct Ruby Bridges from attending school," are missing a crucial point. Reparations is foremost a corporate, rather than individual, responsibility. This is because our racist, kleptocratic social order was constructed and sheltered over the centuries by three corporate entities primarily: the government, the academy,[7] and the church. For this reason, it is these groups that bear the greatest responsibility to ameliorate the harms of the past. And it is as *constituent members* of these groups that we should bear this burden of love and labor tirelessly to address those harms, regardless of our personal histories.

This morning, as members of Christ's body, we should be most concerned with the responsibility of that third group, the church. The temptation to duck that responsibility is strong. Some preach a soaring vision of the church. They require vows of membership. Exegete plural pronouns. Extol the "heritage" of their faith. Honor saints long passed as their own. But when confronted with the church's plunderous past, they abruptly become unaccountable individualists, free agents in Christ, exegetes of singular pronouns, strangers of saints long passed, hermetically sealed from responsibility for defaults not their own. But we must reject fair-weather ecclesiology. "The corporate witness of the church is our witness and the corporate default of the church is our default."[8] *All* of it is *ours,* including even this: responsibility for the terrors of institutionalized white supremacy.

Do you know that Christians in every generation have testified to this? James Birney condemned the church as the "bulwark of slavery." Stephen Foster called it "a power behind the throne greater than the throne itself." Francis Grimké rebuked the Jim Crow era church for being "the great bulwark of race prejudice in this country." The

National Committee for Black Churchmen denounced it as "the moral cement of the structure of racism in this nation."[9] God have mercy! We are implicated, brothers and sisters. The shameful truth is that the Christian church has been *indispensable* to the despoilment of African Americans. The "blemished and scarred body" of Christ has served as thief, accomplice, and silent bystander across the centuries. Will members of Christ's church, those who bear Christ's name today, confess this? More than that, will we pursue the creative, determined, glad-and-grievous work of repair in every place where and in every way that white supremacy has left its deathly mark—reparations on repeat.

Stolen wages—*repay it!*
Stolen bodily integrity—*repair it!*
Stolen public image—*restore it!*
Stolen history—*rewrite it!*
Stolen generational wealth—*regenerate it!*
Stolen education—*rebuild it!*
Stolen suffrage—*reclaim it!*
Stolen land and property—*return it!*

In Jesus' name, repair it all! This work might be carried out by advocating for public programs. Or by creating collaborative church-based ministries in our local community. Or by laboring for the undoing of historical thefts in the institutions and industries we're a part of in our daily work. There are a number of possible ways we might respond. But this much we know: As members of Christ's church in America, beloved, we are called to participate in the repentant return of all that's been stolen.

But what will empower us to do this? To *do* the work of repair? This brings us to our final lesson drawn from Zacchaeus' story: the *power* of repair.

The Power of Repair

Tell me, what changed Zacchaeus? To answer this question, we need to go back to the beginning of the story, where Zacchaeus has a life-transforming encounter with love. Jesus's every move is a complete surprise. Instead of passing by, he *stops*. Instead of averting his eyes in disgust or irritation, Jesus *looks up* at the man in the tree. While the crowd mutters about that "sinner" over there, Jesus addresses him *by name*: "Zacchaeus." And rather than shun and dodge the tax collector like everyone else, Jesus urges him to "come down" and come near. Behold this stunning display of love. It's a love that finds us, stops for us, sees us, calls us by name, and draws us close.

And as if this wasn't already enough, what Jesus does next is nothing short of jaw-dropping: he invites himself over to Zacchaeus' home. He insists on it: "I *must*." Three things are striking about this moment. First, as you may know, dining with someone was a gesture of intimacy and solidarity in the ancient world. It was an unmistakable sign of friendship—in this case, friendship with filth, a tax collector. Here is a culturally unthinkable, inadvisable display of kindness—*scandalous* kindness. Second, by inviting himself over as Zacchaeus's "guest," Jesus is identifying him as being worthy of his

company. And he does so publicly for a man whose spirit lay long imprisoned by public contempt. Here is *un-shaming* grace. And third, Jesus gives Zacchaeus a chance to host him in his home. What's Jesus doing? He's rehabilitating Zacchaeus' heart. The "chief" must become a servant. The pathological taker must learn to give, even as he discovers the God who gives kindness and friendship and forgiveness and salvation and sonship and gives and gives and gives, indeed—as Zacchaeus himself would witness one day—giving even unto death on a cross. In the words of one commentator, Zacchaeus "provides hospitality to Jesus and finds in return the hospitality of God."[10]

We're told in Romans 2:4 that God's kindness leads us to repentance, and therein lies the open secret about what happened to Zacchaeus that day. The tax collector, the plundering predator, was blindsided by love, filled to the brim with the lavish, scandalous kindness poured out by Jesus. Is it any wonder that Zacchaeus' life would dramatically spill over with such a costly gesture of contrition? It's God's kindness that leads us to repentance and repair.

I'm not saying that one needs to be a follower of Christ to do the reparative work of love. In truth, professing Christians are among those most resistant to reparations in America. What I am saying is that followers of Christ—those who, like Zacchaeus, have encountered the saving-kindness of God—*should* be among the most eager, most ready for the work. What I am saying is that white supremacy is at root a *spiritual* sickness that requires the transformation of the inner life. Igniting and sustaining the reparative work of love in one's life, community, or nation requires spiritual power—it requires an incursion of divine love. Have you encountered the inestimable love of Jesus? It's a love that seeks the lost and calls us to "come down." *Descend.* Not from literal tree branches, but from the perches of supremacy in our souls. It's a love that resurrects dead hearts, that remakes rulers into servants, extractors into benefactors, takers into givers. It can do this in your life and mine. Indeed, the same reparative love that visited Jericho can visit our own cities today, just as it did in Pyongyang over one hundred years ago. Let me close by sharing this story with you.

In 1907, a "Great Revival" broke out in the city now known as the capital of North Korea. People begin to grieve over their unconfessed wrongdoing—God's kindness led to repentance. Not only this, their repentance ignited a dramatic display of reparative action. According to William Blair, a missionary to Korea, "All through the city men were going house to house, confessing to individuals they had injured, returning stolen property and money."[11] In some cases, we're told, large sums of money that were unjustly obtained years before were immediately returned, often to the astonishment of the recipients. But you need to hear these words of Blair as he reflected on what had taken place. He observed: "Repentance was by no means confined to confession and tears. Peace waited upon reparation, wherever reparation was possible."

Would we dare to dream and labor for something similar in the streets of this capital city today? Will we refuse to confine our repentance to confession and tears? Will we heed the call to repair? In our city, in our nation, we live surrounded by the restless agony of festering wounds, the peaceless aftermath of plunder and debts unpaid.

Beloved, peace waits upon reparation.

ENDNOTES

[1] Carter G. Woodson, "Some Things Negroes Need to Do," *Southern Workman,* 51 (January 1922), 33-36.

[2] Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

[3] Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.158-62, in *The Works of Philo,* trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

[4] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World, 2017), 201.

[5] Richard Allen, *Freedom's Journal* 1, no. 34 (1827), quoted in David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (Boston: Published by David Walker, 1829), 64; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 40; Maria W. Stewart, "An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall, Boston, February 27, 1833," in *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart (Widow of the Late James W. Stewart), Now Matron of the Freedman's Hospital, and Presented in 1832 to the First African Baptist Church and Society of Boston, Mass.* (Washington, DC: Enterprise, 1879), 69; Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 37; Angelina Emily Grimké, *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836), 15–16; Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; a Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century; with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life,"* ed. Olive Gilbert and Frances W. Titus (Boston, 1875), 197; Henry Highland Garnet, *Walker's Appeal, with a Brief Sketch of His Life. And also Garnet's Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (New York, 1848), 94.

[6] Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth: A Novel,* ed. John F. Callaghan (New York: The Modern Library, 2021), 251.

[7] See Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

[8] John Murray, "Corporate Responsibility," in *Collected Writings of John Murray,* vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 275.

[9] James Gillespie Birney, *The American Churches: The Bulwarks of American Slavery* (Newburyport: Published by Charles Whipple, 1842); Stephen S. Foster, *The Brotherhood of Thieves; or, A True Picture of the American Church and Clergy: A Letter to Nathaniel Barney, of Nantucket* (Concord, NH: Parker Phillsbury, 1884), 28; Francis J. Grimké, "Christianity and Race Prejudice" (1910), in *The Works of Francis J.* Grimké, vol. 1, ed. Carter G. Woodson (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1942), 461; James F. Findlay Jr., *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press), 207-8.

[10] Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2015), 167.

[11] William Newton Blair and Bruce F. Hunt, *The Korean Pentecost and the Sufferings Which Followed* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 75. I am grateful to Rev. Moses Lee for bringing this historical moment to my attention.