

Reparation

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[0 : 00] As Anthony said, my name is Erin Byrne, and I am the Director of Family Ministry here at The Table. This week, we are continuing our series on race and justice in the church, and I'd like to start by asking you all to think about how you imagine a just society.

If this were a Table Kids activity, I would ask you to draw it, and if you happen to have a pen and paper with you, you are welcome to draw your vision for the world throughout this sermon. But if not, just take a minute to think about the world you want to live in and imagine what that world would look like and feel like.

Throughout the summer, we've been talking about some steps towards racial justice, and we've spent a lot of time talking about what the world looks like today, learning how each of us can focus on awareness, confession, and repentance about the ways that injustice looks and feels in modern America.

Today, I want us to envision the world we're trying to get to, and I'm going to highlight some of the tools we're given in the Bible to work towards that place. I'm going to start by talking about the tools that God gave the ancient Israelites to make sure everyone was treated fairly in their society, and then we're going to talk about what that means for us in our world today, both as a society and as individuals.

We're drawing from all five of the first five books of the Bible today, so as a refresher, the Bible starts with the book of Genesis, and then the next four books all tell the story of Moses and the Israelites as they leave Egypt, go up and down a couple mountains, and then receive a bunch of laws about how they are supposed to run their society once they get to the Promised Land.

[1 : 45] Together, these five books are called the Torah. The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy form the basis of the laws practiced by ancient Israelites as well as by many modern Jews, and they also stand out from other ancient law codes because they tell the story of God's relationship with the ancient Israelites.

Today, we're going to focus specifically on some laws around rest. You may know that God gave the ancient Israelites a day of rest every seventh day called the Sabbath. We can think of the Sabbath as a little taste of heaven on earth where for one day a week, humanity gets to experience the world as it was meant to be.

I imagine it like we're all in the Wizard of Oz movie, and for six days, we're all working in the dusty brown world of Kansas, but for one day, we get a chance to view a vibrant, technicolor vision of heaven through a tradition of rest.

In the story of the law, from this foundation of a Sabbath day every seven days, God gives the Israelites a Sabbath year, a full year to rest and reset every seven years.

In the book of Exodus, God commands, six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, but in the seventh, you shall let it rest and lie fallow.

[2 : 58] Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave, let the wild beasts eat. In the version of this law in Deuteronomy, deaths are also canceled every seventh year, so the ancient Israelites would get a glance of heaven every week, and then every seven years, they get a full year of living heaven on earth.

And then, not only do they have this seventh day of rest and seventh year of a Sabbath, but in Leviticus 25, God tells Moses, you shall count off, wait for it, seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of 49 years.

Then you shall sound the horn loud in the seventh month on the tenth day of the month, the day of atonement, that's Yom Kippur. You shall have the horn sounded throughout your land, and you shall hallow the fiftieth year.

You shall proclaim a release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you. Each of you shall return to your property, and each of you shall return to your family.

So God tells the ancient Israelites that every 50 years, they should give land back to whoever owned it 50 years ago, so that no one group of people can accumulate more than they need, and no other group of people is left without land.

[4 : 12] How do they know who had the land 50 years ago? Great question. In the book of Numbers, the Israelites conduct two censuses, that's why it's called Numbers, and they divide the land based on the number of people in each family, so every family would have had enough land to start out with.

In this context, the tradition of the jubilee is a system that restores equality twice every century as another way for God to show the Israelites what heaven looks like. I want us to pause again and think about what these traditions would mean for our lives.

How would it impact our society if all wealth, including land and debts, were reset on a regular basis? Maybe imagine the jubilee is 15 years from now. How does that change how you would live your life and the choices that you would make?

Thank you. For me, I think it would have a huge impact on how I save.

If the jubilee were coming up in 15 years, it wouldn't be worth it for me to save money for retirement because I'm not retiring in the next 15 years. I would have to trust in God and my community to provide for me when I get there.

[5 : 28] We don't even have to imagine all wealth resetting if we just take the literal requirements of the jubilee. Returning land to its previous owners would be a tremendous shift.

In the United States, homeownership is a primary way that people both build wealth and pass it on to their children. A 2018 study found that somewhere between a quarter and a half of adult Americans' wealth position is a direct result of wealth from their parents.

Parents paying for a down payment on a house, paying for children's education, or children inheriting land and property. Resetting wealth and land every 50 years would change a lot about who has money and power in our society.

And in that sense, it does bring us closer to this vision of heaven on earth. When I think about the Sabbath year and the jubilee year, I often imagine the ancient Israelites waiting, excited for the year when debts will be canceled and when equality will be restored.

But as I was reading through this section recently, it occurred to me that not everybody would have been happy about debts being canceled. People in debt certainly would be happy about that.

[6 : 32] But people who have lent out money would not be excited for the year that guarantees they're not getting it back. People and families who have lost land in the intervening years would be grateful, but those who gained it would not have looked forward to returning it.

Equality sounds good in theory, but in practice, it's a threat to people in power, to people who benefit from having the scales tipped. When we read the Bible, it's easy to identify with those who don't have power, to imagine ourselves as the Israelites when they were slaves or captives, or apostles and prophets who were persecuted for their faith.

We know that Jesus obviously was also killed. But the Bible is also filled with people who wield power over others, and each of us also has some power. We may have economic power like the ancient Israelite property owners who would have lost land at the Jubilee, the power of not being targeted on the basis of my race, the power of my marriage being considered legitimate by the law and by everyone I know.

The Bible has a lot to say about what to do with the power we do have and how to use it to work towards God's vision of a just world. We've been focusing on the beginning of the Bible so far, but Jesus also emphasizes our responsibility to recognize the power we have and then to repair harm, including harm that other people have caused.

The Good Samaritan could just look at the battered man in the road and say, Yikes, too bad somebody else hurt that guy. Obviously, he doesn't do that. But importantly, he also doesn't just apologize.

[8 : 02] Wow, I'm so sorry that happened to you. I will be praying that someone else comes by to give you the help you need. I want to be clear that apologizing is important, as we've talked about during this sermon series.

Praying for people is important, and that's not the story that Jesus tells about the Samaritan who found a man beaten by robbers and left half dead on the side of the road.

Instead, Jesus says that the Samaritan went to the battered man and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

The next day, he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. Look after him, he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.

Being a neighbor requires us to sacrifice our time and wealth to repair harm, including harm that we ourselves had nothing to do with. More broadly, the New Testament tells us what it means to be a Christian.

[9 : 04] Sometimes as Christians, we allow ourselves to believe that our job is mainly to follow the rules of the Bible to get into heaven or to convert other people so that they can be saved. Theologian James Cone writes that before the Civil War, white missionaries focused on convincing enslaved black Americans that the point of Christianity was getting into heaven and that the key to heaven was obedience on earth.

It's not hard to imagine why white missionaries would have wanted to do that. Dr. Cone writes, but the black churches refused to accept an interpretation of Christianity that was unrelated to social change.

They knew that although Christianity is eschatological, which is related to the afterlife or the end of the world, it must be related to the suffering of black men now.

As Dr. Cone points out, simply teaching people about Jesus does not free the enslaved. It does not house the homeless or feed the hungry.

Instead, when Jesus started his ministry, he quoted Isaiah, and thank you, worship team, for reading this earlier as well. He quoted Isaiah saying, In the Gospel of Luke, these are the words that Jesus uses to start his ministry.

[10 : 31] I think we should take him literally. The practice of the Jubilee, proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, as Jesus puts it, is a practice of creating heaven here. For me, this start to Jesus' ministry is a litmus test for my own Christianity.

Is my faith today good news to the poor? Is the table church in 2021 proclaiming freedom for prisoners, not only praying for prisoners, but also freeing them?

Is the global church in the 21st century setting the oppressed free? Dr. Cone's early contemporary, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., also preached that Jesus' message was not about some far-off kingdom of God, but about creating the year of the Lord today.

In a sermon in 1966, Dr. King preached about a slightly different translation of this same passage from Luke, in which Jesus calls the Jubilee the acceptable year of the Lord.

Dr. King preached, Some people reading this passage feel that it's talking about some period beyond history, but I say to you this morning that the acceptable year of the Lord can be this year, and the church is called to preach it.

[11 : 40] The acceptable year of the Lord is any year, when men decide to do right. The system of the Jubilee year lays out a concrete way that we can decide to do right and create heaven in this world anytime we choose.

So how did the ancient Israelites decide to do right in their context? We know that they didn't have a lot of money in the sense of gold or bank accounts, so the Jubilee would have been a time to return the main types of wealth that they could accumulate, land and debt, which we've talked about before, as well as slaves.

The Torah allows for ancient Israelites to hold slaves, and that is something that I struggle with a lot. We know that slavery was never a part of God's plan, but it was a part of the world that the Israelites lived in and of the surrounding cultures.

This was usually debt slavery, so if you had a bad harvest and you didn't have enough food to feed your family, you might sell your property, and then if things got dire, you would take out debt and work for someone else to pay off that debt.

But as we know, every seven years, debts are to be released, and the Sabbath year also required ancient Israelite slaveholders to return enslaved people to their families and their ancestral homes. When this happened, the Bible required the slaveholders give the people they'd enslaved the means to survive.

[12 : 58] In Deuteronomy 15, God says, When you send a slave out from you, a free person, you shall not send them out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress, thus giving to them some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you.

A biblical vision of justice and repairing of harm doesn't just require us to acknowledge the harm and stop doing it, it also requires us to give back. Throughout the Torah, the laws around restitution required ancient Israelites to repair the harm they had done.

If the harm they did could be quantified, God asked the Israelites to pay back that harm plus 20%. The laws around restitution get pretty specific. If the person who was hurt has died or can't be found, you should pay the amount you owe them, plus 20%, to their children.

So paying people back for harm done isn't just between the two people involved. The obligation is intergenerational. So, if someone confesses that they stole my father's goat 30 years ago, and my father is no longer alive, they still owe me the money.

On the other hand, if my father hurt or stole from someone else, I am responsible for confessing that sin and repairing that harm. And to me, that honestly feels fair.

[14 : 16] Even though I didn't steal the goat as a child, I probably ate the meat. I probably benefited from it while the victim's family went hungry. If I were to repair that harm, that brings us all closer to a biblical vision of justice, the vision of creating heaven here.

Throughout the history of the United States, systems of harm have often taken place through intergenerational structures. Starting in the early 1800s, hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their parents and placed in violent residential schools, usually run by Christians, where they were not allowed to practice their Indigenous cultures or speak their Native languages.

Although these schools have finally all closed, the result is an intergenerational legacy of trauma and an immeasurable loss of language and culture. Those of us who are not Indigenous have an intergenerational obligation not only to end the harm, but also to work towards repair.

Within the context of slavery, an enslaved person's children were considered to be the property of their enslaver, so the trauma of slavery continued throughout the generations of a family. Theologian Januqua Walker-Barnes points out that this intergenerational legacy impacts Black as well as white Americans.

Many Black Americans today have inherited the trauma of the experience of slavery, and white Americans have inherited the legacy of slaveholders, the legacy of spending hundreds of years trying to hold on to the belief that they were good Christian people while at the same time violently enacting and defending slavery.

[15 : 45] For white Americans, a part of our intergenerational inheritance is that defensiveness, the willingness to defend systems of racism and violence in order to continue to view ourselves as the good Christians of this country.

Throughout the 1960s, millions of non-white Americans paid taxes to fund services they were not eligible to receive simply because of their race, tax dollars that supported state colleges they were not allowed to attend, New Deal and GI Bill programs that excluded them, and housing loans that were denied to them.

Remember that a large portion of adult Americans' wealth today comes directly from their parents, so these 20th century policies still impact us in the 21st century. Even white people who did not hold slaves, establish residential schools, or enact these social programs certainly reaped the benefits of the injustice.

Someone else stole the goat, but all white Americans have continued to eat the stolen meat. And if we take the Bible's teachings on repair seriously, it is the responsibility of white Americans to confess that guilt and the guilt of our ancestors and to repay that harm.

When we look at the gap between modern America and the vision of a just world that we're given in Leviticus, where all wealth is reset every 50 years, it can feel hard to imagine bridging that divide.

[17 : 07] But just as God gave the ancient Israelites tools to repair the harm in their society, we have tools to work towards reparations in 21st century America, because that's what this is.

Reparation is the work of repairing harm, and it is an essential part of the process of pursuing justice. Conversations about reparations often feel very political, and they have to be.

Income inequality is an inherently political problem. The book of Leviticus and the whole Torah are political books. They are the story of God's instructions on how to run a society. That's what politics is.

Just as importantly, Jesus' work often centered marginalized people in his society and criticized those in power when they focused on themselves instead of on improving life for everyone. Talking about Jesus is political.

Restoration of the world through Jesus requires literal reparation of harm. In 1969, the National Black Economic Development Conference started demanding that white churches pay reparations to black people in America.

[18 : 10] When asked why they were demanding reparations specifically from churches, the chairman, Reverend Calvin B. Marshall III, responded, because the church is the only institution claiming to be in the business of salvation, resurrection, and the giving and restoring of life.

General Motors has never made such a claim. We know that as Christians, we are called to create a better world. But the other reason that Christians have to lead the work towards reparations is simply that Christianity has led the harm.

The doctrine of discovery was a Christian doctrine that said that Christians could and should take over non-Christian lands. Christian preachers not only held slaves, but also justified the practice of slavery on a national scale.

Christian churches have served as gathering places and safe havens for white supremacists up to the present day. I imagine that most of this congregation has seen the photos of people marching on the Capitol on January 6th of this year, the signs saying, Jesus saves.

So what is our political responsibility towards repairing the harm of white American Christianity? The 2020 book, *From Here to Equality*, gives one of the most in-depth calculations for reparations, recommending financial payments to descendants of enslaved Americans, but also alternative forms of support, such as home loans, free college tuition, and support for black-owned businesses on a national level, all in line with the types of programs and aid that have been given to white Americans in the last hundred years, the programs that black Americans and sometimes other communities of color have been excluded from.

[19 : 45] As some of you probably know, every year since 1989, a representative in the House has introduced a bill, H.R. 40, to simply study slavery and evaluate what reparations might be appropriate on the national scale.

This bill made it out of committee and onto the House floor in April for the first time in its 32-year history. I hesitated to bring up the national calls for reparations because I know that people in Washington, D.C.

don't need another reminder to call your representatives, but I do know that people in this church work in politics on the national level, and that bill, H.R. 40, is a key part of the political work towards reparations in this country.

Paid reparations for black Americans have a specific importance here in Washington, D.C., because this city is the only place in the country where slaveholders were paid to free their enslaved workers. So instead of the system in Deuteronomy where slaveholders were told to free their workers every seven years and provide them with livestock and food, or the system in Leviticus where you repay people if you hurt them, in Washington, D.C., the people causing harm received money, and the people being hurt were left with nothing.

But reparations are, of course, a national issue. Other national policy issues reflect the ideals of the Jubilee as well, work towards giving land back to Native American tribes, broader work towards economic equality, and work towards debt forgiveness on a large scale, which, as we've discussed, is an explicit way that the Torah creates economic justice.

[21 : 14] If you have power to make change in these areas, I recommend you use it. But I also know that talking about such broad issues can sometimes make us feel hopeless as individuals. If we, as a church, believe that reparations for racial harm are necessary and biblical, quote, there must be something more concrete that we all can do.

So what does it look like for the table church to repair racial harm? If the Jubilee is about returning land to its original owners, then for us, as Christians in the Americas, one of the natural applications would be returning land to indigenous groups.

A number of churches throughout the U.S. and Canada have started working with tribes in their regions to give back land that Christians have stolen from those same tribes. denominations around the U.S. have started going through some of the steps that we've been discussing in this sermon series.

They've acknowledged the harm that they caused over hundreds of years. They've started confessing their sins, their communal sins, and the sins of their ancestors. And then just in the last decade or so, a few churches in the U.S. and Canada have taken that next step of building relationships with local indigenous groups and finding ways to support them, whether through financial support, giving land back, or both.

As individuals, we can donate to organizations run by American Indians that support indigenous groups here, such as the Native American Rights Fund and the American Indian College Fund. I also want to be clear that repair doesn't undo harm.

[22 : 41] Christians killed, imprisoned, and abused millions of Native Americans in the name of God, and we cannot undo that. We have to lament, as Heidi recently preached about, and confess, as Ana Jelsey preached about a few weeks ago, because the harm has already been done.

And then, we worked with those affected to say, what is the best restitution that we can provide? If we think about the Jubilee as a 50-year period, who's lost land in Washington, D.C.

in the last 50 years? And how can we repair that harm? 50 years ago, with the 1970 census, the black population of D.C. was the highest it's ever been. There were 537,000 black residents living in Washington, D.C.

At that time, there were more than two and a half times as many black Washingtonians as white Washingtonians, but a lot can change in 50 years. In the last 20 years, the white population of D.C.

has kept growing, while the black population has stayed largely the same. When people from outside of D.C., such as myself, come into D.C., we drive up the price of rent.

[23 : 42] Developers demolish old buildings, pushing out long-term residents, and replace the buildings with new ones that the original residents can't afford. As a church, we do some work to mitigate that harm through our partnership with the Washington Interfaith Network, which advocates for affordable housing across the city.

The faith-based organization Just Homes also works to encourage churches and individual property owners to give up land so that it can be used for affordable housing. And I recommend that people in this congregation participate in the work that both of those organizations are doing.

This work is exciting and important, and we, the Table Church, don't own any land. We do, however, provide community for a few hundred people who can each evaluate the impact that we have on this city.

When people from other places move into D.C., we often expect the chain stores we're used to, the Targets and Starbucks, rather than supporting long-time local stores and restaurants. We call neighborhoods by the names that developers use to rebrand them.

The Table is about to reopen our Kohai Parish. The name Kohai is an abbreviation for Columbia Heights, is less than 10 years old. On our behalf, cities including D.C. replace affordable grocery stores with high-end stores, making it harder for low-income residents to buy something as basic as food.

[24 : 56] I want to note that this isn't always clear-cut. A new grocery store, a new gym, metro station, school, or, yes, a new church, can provide a valuable and needed service for our community.

And that business or organization can drive up property values and push out long-term residents and local businesses. So it's not that all change is bad.

It's that we have to recognize when the good things we do have negative effects. And as Christians, we have an obligation then to see when we cause harm and work towards repair. On an even more local level, each of us comes to this church with our own ideas of what church should look like.

I grew up in a Presbyterian church where the congregation was expected to sit silently during the sermon, where the prayers were rarely more than 30 seconds long, and where about 95% of the songs and sermons I heard were written by white men.

And I bring those expectations and that background with me into any church service I go to. Some of the preachers at the table will ask you all to respond out loud as they preach. You'll notice that I started by asking you all to sit and think quietly.

[26 : 01] So each of us has our own history with the church. Our expectations around how long prayers should be, how much the congregation should respond to the preacher, and what kind of music we should be playing all also have a racial history.

We, the table church, have to repent of the fact that we have sometimes chosen to believe that historically white ways of operating a church are the right way, and that in doing so we have pushed out people of color.

Sometimes we have called for diversity when in fact we're looking for assimilation. Sometimes we have failed to hear or chosen not to hear criticisms from marginalized groups in our congregation about the ways that we're doing things.

So knowing that we have caused harm, what tools do we have to work towards repair? In the context of today's scripture, God knew that the ancient Israelites would want to hoard wealth and fail to fully understand other people's need for rest and freedom, so God gave them tools like the Sabbath year and the Jubilee to repair that harm.

What tools does God give us? When a church in Baltimore found out that its founder had been a slaveholder and started to learn about the ways that that church had participated in segregation, they pledged half a million dollars towards causes supporting black Baltimoreans with the use of the money directed by black leaders in Baltimore.

[27 : 24] With the understanding that we as a church have participated in racism and gentrification in Washington, D.C., can we do something similar? So this work is political and it's communal and it's also individual.

We have to remember that each of us holds power just by being in whatever rooms we're in and the good news is that we can use that power to bring repair into our communities. That looks different for everyone.

In my job, I work with statistics and data and I know that my field has often explained racial differences as though they were based on behavior. So researchers see that white Americans have higher wealth than other groups.

Maybe it's because communities of color don't prioritize education or they're less entrepreneurial or they have less supportive families even though the data doesn't bear that out and we've discussed some of the reasons why that is actually true.

So part of my work towards reparations as a data analyst is truth-telling, recognizing when the information I'm looking at includes racist assumptions and making sure that I am representing information honestly to repair the way that my field has perpetuated racism.

[28 : 30] If you work in human resources, maybe your work towards reparations in your job can be making sure that your company is paying people fairly and giving everyone enough time off. Remember that God gives the ancient Israelites a full year of rest every seven years as part of making heaven on earth.

If you work in international relations, maybe your work involves being critical about how white American missionary work and colonialism have defined that field and you can actively work to question those practices and start to repair that harm rather than contributing to it.

Our power to make change may be primarily at work but it doesn't have to be. Maybe you can wield power by showing up to meetings for your neighborhood commission, your ANC, and encouraging your neighbors to support the development of affordable housing nearby or by listening to what marginalized groups in your neighborhood are asking for and advocating for those things alongside them.

So if I could ask for one more minute of your silent Presbyterian-style reflection, I would love for each of us to think about the following questions. How can I work to make sure that my friend groups, my dinner party, my coworkers, my family are listening to those who we may have hurt?

When people from marginalized groups in my community speak up, how can I uplift and support them in that? So as we transition into communion today, I'd like each of us to think about the specific confessions that we're making, the things that we've done and left undone, the ways that we have not loved God with our whole hearts by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

[30 : 23] And then, once we have confessed and taken part in the communion, I want us also to think and talk and act to repair that harm so that we can live the year of the Lord today and create earth as it is in heaven right here in Washington, D.C.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for the opportunity to learn. We thank you for the grace that you give us and the ability to extend that grace to one another.

I pray that this church can be an agent for change in Washington, D.C. and that you would guide each of us in how we can repair the harm that we and those around us have done so that we can join you in creating heaven on earth today and every day.

In your name we pray. Amen. Amen.