

Seekers Church and Reparations

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December 15, 2024

Third Sunday of Advent

It has been at least five years (or since I joined Seekers) since we last examined our domestic and international giving principles and guidelines. During that time, the REJMT was created, and we conducted a whole season, examining racism and white supremacy during Lent this year. As part of that ongoing liturgy, I preached a sermon on reparations, and called for us

to have a conversation on how Seekers considers institutional racism and reparations in our giving programs.

We've struggled a bit around the right time to have this conversation – Advent is a busy time for us all, and we want to give folks the space to reflect on these questions as we raise them. So, we are postponing our community conversation until January. But the call to that conversation is being delivered today.

So, in this talk, I am going to do a bit of a refresher – share what reparations mean to me, and how I think they are different from traditional forms of charity, describe a little of what Seekers is currently doing with its giving programs, and pose some questions for us to consider around how we might reframe our giving programs as reparations.

So – what are reparations, and what is the difference between reparations and charity? Charity is based on the assumption that what we have, we have by right, and we share with others out of our generosity and their need. When we are charitable, we give because our heart strings are pulled, but we accept the status quo as we do so – not always seeing what we have done to cause the circumstances of those who need help. If we are charitable, we might help to address downstream harms, but we are not addressing upstream causes, and nor are we necessarily healing ourselves of our complicity in causing those harms.

Reparations, on the other hand, are about making amends for a wrong by compensating those harmed and helping to repair that harm. Reparations recognizes that many of those who are in need are so as a result of systemic injustices, exploitation, extraction, and theft, and are not merely unfortunate. They also recognize that many of us, consciously or unconsciously,

are complicit in those injustices. When we talk about “repair” for something we have stolen, we don’t keep what we have taken, and give someone a gift, or a donation instead; rather we return what we have taken. And, we also seek ways to repair the material and spiritual harms that we have caused to the people we have stolen from, as well as ways to repair our own spirits: to change ourselves to heal the harm and make sure that it doesn’t happen again.

So reparations is more than just giving of our wealth. Reparations are both material (returning things that have been taken and compensating for their loss), and relational (repairing the broken relationship). And if reparations are **relational**, then they are more than a one-time effort – more than a one-time charitable gift – they are actually an ongoing process.

I want to talk more about that process. Back in our Lenten liturgy, Peter came up with a nifty “A”s framework for us preachers to consider as we talked about the process of reparations– awareness, acknowledgement, acceptance, action, and accountability.

So let’s start with Awareness , Acknowledgment, and Acceptance: The first step in reparations is recognizing the harms caused through white supremacy – the massacres and genocide, the stealing of land and resources, the environmental degradation, the stigmatizing, the “othering” of people. The reparations process begins with naming these harms out loud, feeling our complicity, and standing the heat of our responsibility.

Jim March told us about this process and how it feels in his inward outward reflection on Dec 6:

“ while cleaning out an old closet, I uncovered a box full of old documents... Sifting through it, I discovered the Will of my great grandmother’s great grandfather. I sat in stunned

silence as I read what he left behind. Only the first names of the slaves were listed, each one given to his surviving children. Human beings passed down like heirlooms. In my right hand I held my Will, and in my left, the Will of my ancestor. With the weight of souls in my hands, balancing waves of grief like the scales of justice, I cried out, "What is the way through?"

In the political space, there are many who say that teaching critical race theory and reparations should be abolished because they think it is intended to make people feel bad about who they are. That it just leaves us "balancing waves of grief". If reparations were ONLY about opening our eyes, and making us aware of the harms of white supremacy, then they would be right – because if we feel bad about ourselves, we will turn away from the pain, and nothing will change. We are only able to stand the heat of acknowledging the harms if we ALSO recognize our own essential goodness, our own belonging to the world and the community, and our deep connectedness to those we have harmed. We cannot heal until we see and feel the wound AND also believe we deserve to heal.

And I believe THAT recognition comes to us through the grace of god!

Jim March continues

John the Baptist prepares the way for the young rabbi whose voice we have not yet heard. A baptism of fire, following that of water, will purify and cleanse those hearts seeking forgiveness. A clarion call for justice, for decency, and for the value of every life. As I pray for my ancestors, an umbrella of grace held over the shame, a path of repair emerges. A way is prepared for healing to move.*

So the first step in making reparations is awareness, and acceptance – both of the harms we have done, but also, through grace of God, of our own essential goodness. That recognition

helps us to heal, and frees us to turn in love to those we have harmed.

Let me give you an example of the freeing grace of acknowledgment. – when I left MSP, I had just been hired by an indigenous elder I had known for years, to support her as she sought ways to transition leadership of her non-profit organization. When I was offered a (much more lucrative) job here in DC I resigned, overturning her plans for her retirement. For nearly five years I carried the guilt and shame of the harm I caused to her – one more white lady, unable to follow through on her well-meaning commitments to indigenous peoples. I couldn't think of her, or her work, or working with ANY indigenous people's without pain, and a measure of turning away. Just a few weeks ago, she was here in DC, and reached out to me to get together for dinner. During that conversation, I was able to apologize to her, and she showed me with every smile, word and anecdote that she still loved me. She showed me that she saw my essential goodness, despite the harms I had inflicted – and it released me, not just in terms of my relationship with her, but with all Indigenous people. I can live with the pain of those harms now, and want to reach out to work with her and the community with all my heart.

So that brings us to action.

What my experience shows me is that for me to give freely and abundantly – to take actions of reparations – I need to be connected to those who have been harmed.

Let me give you another example. I have been gradually learning more about Apache Stronghold, the organization of indigenous people which is working to overturn legislation that has allowed foreign copper mining interests to destroy their sacred lands of Oak Flat in Arizona. To begin with, the effort to support Apache Stronghold members as they presented their amicus brief to the Supreme Court in September was more

of a charitable effort on my part – I saw their need and wanted to be generous. We began by collecting money to provide food for Apache Stronghold when they came to D.C. But then, I began to get to know the members of Apache Stronghold and their supporters better – by helping to cook the food we had bought, by driving supporters home, by attending the service at 8th Day Church when they spoke movingly of their spiritual call and commitments, and at a meeting last week when supporters described their visits to Oak Flat, their experience of the land there and the generosity of their Apache hosts. One supporter described the work that her students at the Christian Family Montessori school in DC have done learning about Oak Flat. Here is part of a lament one of the students wrote that is part of a brochure they have developed to advocate for Apache Stronghold. *“We lament and cry out because of their broken promises and lies. We’ve been waiting for so long. Protect Oak Flat. My soul has forsaken me because of injustice. Without you, Creator God, the forests will be cut down, the water will be poisoned, the animals will die, and the land will collapse. How long must I cry to you, O Lord? Oak Flat is so sacred and important to so many people.”*

As I participated in these opportunities to connect – listening to people sharing their experiences, their stories, and the impact on their spirits, I was drawn in. I was invited to stand side by side with them. When that happened I felt call – I wanted to seek ways to give this land back out of love and solidarity, and not out of obligation and duty. Reparations becomes a call, not a burden.

So, in summary, reparations is about recognizing how we have harmed, recognizing our essential goodness, and engaging in solidarity, out of which our land and wealth back contributions become abundant, freely given, liberating, connecting.

So, what does this have to do with Seekers giving programs? How is Seekers already doing in moving from charity to reparations? How does our giving help our members move through this Reparations process?

Seekers has already moved to action, and to prevent further harms in its giving by disinvesting in institutions that perpetuate exploitation and extraction. We invest in **Hope Credit Union** that operates in the South “offering financial services, and engaging in advocacy that strengthens the financial health and wealth of people in under-resourced Deep South communities.” We also invest in **Manna** which builds low income housing and promotes home ownership among under-resourced individuals and families. Finally we have some money in **City First Bank**, a financial institution servicing inner city DC. In addition our giving guidelines already move toward principles of reparations, most especially by expecting us to be engaged with the organizations we propose to support, and also to share information about those organizations with all Seekers.

But while I think these are important components of the reparations process that we have already undertaken, I do have additional questions-

Firstly, around the acknowledgment, and acceptance part of reparations:

Can our giving guidelines and choices better support opening the eyes of our community to the truth of our history, to our unconscious complicity? Perhaps we can change our guidelines to explicitly acknowledge the harms of white supremacy and prioritize giving to organizations that work to build broad social awareness of it and ways we can work together to bring about change?

And, can our guidelines more overtly acknowledge our responsibility to return stolen wealth and land? Currently,

when we make our donations through domestic and international giving, we require the recipient organizations to demonstrate their ability to be accountable for those funds – to have a board to provide oversight or some kind of financial plan or financial statements. I question the extent to which such requirements trap us into a charitable mind set – giving on our own terms, according to our own criteria of what is worthy, and retaining some kind of control over how those resources will be used. Do such requirements enable us to think of our giving as returning what has been taken? Do they help us to let go of our desire to control their use, and recognize that we have no right to determine how they will be used in the future? Are there ways of giving that do not require traditional financial structures to be in place? How would we define such a group? What level of funding would we be willing to give? What kinds of accountability WOULD we require?

And then I question around the actions part of reparations

Our giving guidelines ask for us to be engaged with the organizations we support, and we are a predominantly white congregation. How can we better promote and support engagement of our members in organizations of color? Are there times when we might want to modify our guidelines to allow for giving without such engagement – this might be particularly true for our international giving program?

Can we use our giving programs to better support Seekers who are already working with organization of color– so that they are enabled to more actively give of their time and love? For example, Apache Stronghold seeks people to “provide on-the-ground prayer filled accompaniment at Oak Flat” , sending people to Arizona for weeks at a time to provide in-person support. Can our guidelines move beyond merely financial gifts and provide space or support for such personal actions of solidarity?

And, most importantly, how can our giving guidelines and choices better support the spiritual awakening and growth that calls us to solidarity and connection with each other and with the peoples we seek to repair relationships with? How can our guidelines encourage and support Seekers to more routinely and publicly share the impact of their work on their spirit and the spirits of those they are working with?

The Seekers community already knows about connection , solidarity, and the call to spiritual support for each other. I can't wait for our conversation in the New Year to help us keep expanding those gifts out to our entire community. May it be so.