

Dear Class Member,

An additional discussion sheet for this week opens with news that the Society of Jesus (Jesuit order) has committed to a process of attempting to atone for their order's past ownership and sale of slaves. In our class we will explore what rebuilding lives, establishing justice and healing communities might look like when people of faith recognize and repent of their corporate sin.



## Jesuits Pledge Resources to Descendants of Former Slaves

*The Wired Word for the Week of March 28, 2021*

### In the News

The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) recently announced plans to raise an initial sum of \$100 million in three to five years for the descendants of enslaved people whose labor the Roman Catholic order once exploited to finance their religious missions and educational institutions such as Georgetown University.

The decision stems from a 2017 request to the Rev. Arturo Sosa, the Jesuit superior general, from the GU272 Descendants Association, that the Jesuits make a sincere effort to atone for their enslavement and sale of 272 people by raising \$1 billion to fund education and support for about 5,000 descendants of those slaves.

Joseph Stewart is one of 1,000 descendants of Isaac Hawkins, who was one of the 272 slaves "sold to save Georgetown University from financial ruin." In 1838, Jesuits in Maryland sold 272 enslaved people, ranging in age from infants to elderly laborers, to Louisiana plantation owners to pay off the school's debt.

In a letter to Jan Roothaan, S.J., superior general of the Society of Jesus, who authorized the sale, Peter Havermans, S.J., protested the action as "tragic and disgraceful," motivated either by callous greed of evil people "such as slave traders who care about nothing but money," or by desperation of people so hard-pressed by overwhelming debt that they feel they have no other choice.

A year later, Pope Gregory XVI issued his encyclical *In Supremo* (1839), in which he declared slave trading incompatible with the Gospel.

In 2017, Georgetown renamed a building in Isaac Hawkins' honor. At the time, Sosa apologized for the Society of Jesus' actions, declaring, "Jesuit slaveholding in the United States, and in particular the sale of 272 enslaved persons from the Jesuits in southern Maryland to purchasers in Louisiana, was both a sin and a betrayal because the Society robbed your ancestors of their human dignity."

Stewart now serves as acting president of the nonprofit Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation. "After 182 years, Descendants and Jesuits have come together in the spirit of truth, racial healing and reconciliation, uniquely positioning the Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation to set an example and lead America through dismantling the remnants of slavery and mitigating the presence of racism," he said.

"We were looking for an approach that would engage in a positive way a partnership between all men of good will on changing the future, since we can't change the past," Stewart clarified.

The Jesuit website for the Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation Project includes the following statement: "The Jesuits recognize that slavery is evil and that their slaveholding was a sin. We are led by descendants of people the Jesuits held in slavery as we engage in a long overdue process of truth-telling and transformation."

They confess: "We, the Jesuits, deeply regret our participation in this evil institution. No one today can reconcile these actions with the current teaching of the Church or with our commitments as Jesuits, but they are an undeniable part of our history."

Their goal, they say, is "reconciliation and healing that, in conversation with the descendants of people held in bondage, acknowledges historical harms, seeks to repair relationships, and works within our communities to address the legacies of slavery that persist in the form of racial inequities today."

The religious and educational organizations who are working together on this issue of how to repair lives and communities harmed through the slave trade agree on the importance of centering the experiences and perspectives of those who were held in bondage and their descendants, rather than those of the slaveholders. The Jesuits say they are committed to prioritizing and respecting the voices, humanity, dignity and needs of descendants and descendant communities, and to following their lead as they work through the process of dealing with their slaveholding history and explore how to move forward into a more just future.

Other Catholic orders and Protestant denominations and agencies have placed the legacy of slavery and racism on their agenda for discussion and possible action to repair damage to those most affected.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Jesuits Pledge \$100 Million for Descendants of People Their Order Enslaved. *Religion News Service*

Jesuits Pledge \$100 Million for Descendants of Enslaved People the Catholic Order Once Owned. *The Washington Post*

Slavery, History, Memory and Reconciliation. *Jesuits.org*

Built by Slaves and Jesuits. *The Hoya*

Interview: How the Jesuits Are Working to Confront Their History of Slavery. *America*

### **Applying the News Story**

Often, the church has spoken of salvation and repentance in terms of individuals. This news addresses salvation and repentance in broader terms, as those concepts apply to groups, particularly religious communities. For some of us, this may be less familiar territory. But as we explore ways to repair brokenness in families, churches, nations and the world, this discussion seems timely.

### **The Big Questions**

1. How does repentance for an individual's personal sin compare and contrast with repentance for the sin of a group or society?
2. What is the difference, if any, between restitution, reparations and restorative justice?
3. What biblical models for restitution, reparations and restorative justice come to mind?
4. In some antique stores, you might find a sign declaring: "If you break it, you buy it!" How might this "rule" apply in human relations in general, and in the matter of human exploitation and enslavement in particular?
5. How do we sinners decide what to do to fix what we have broken?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Jonah 3:6-10**

*When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All*

*shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (For context, read 3:1-10.)*

When the prophet Jonah proclaimed God's message that the city of Nineveh would be overthrown in 40 days, the residents, from the greatest to the smallest, believed God, humbled themselves and repented in sackcloth and ashes of their evil, violent ways; they fasted and cried out to God for forgiveness and mercy.

**Questions:** What do you think would have been Nineveh's fate if only a few of the 120,000 residents (Jonah 4:11) had repented and turned from their evil ways? What difference did it make to the people that the entire city, from top to bottom -- including the animals -- participated in the fast? What difference did it make to God?

When, if ever, have you seen a nation or a church refuse to admit sin or guilt, even when the people clearly disdained God and God's law, while at times pretending that God winked at their sin? How did that attitude impact the people?

When, if ever, have you seen a nation or a church repent of sin as a group? What happened to the group after that?

### **Exodus 12:35-36, 38**

*The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians. ... A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds. (For context, read 12:33-42.)*

When Moses led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, the Egyptians who had fought so hard to keep the slaves in captivity were so eager for the plagues God had inflicted upon them to end that they actually drove the Israelites out. They willingly gave them valuables and livestock -- in a way, a form of compensation for the 430 years they had lived and worked without pay in Egypt.

But we don't really see repentance on the part of the Egyptians. Instead, there is a sense that they are forced to let the Israelites go in order to save themselves from further devastation. They don't seem to be motivated by genuine sorrow over their mistreatment and exploitation of the slaves or their ancestors over centuries. So, even after the Israelites make for the exit, the Egyptians change their minds and pursue them, presumably to reenslave their cheap labor force.

**Questions:** How should God's people respond when oppressors are disinclined to relinquish their stranglehold on them? What should Christ-followers do when they discover that they have directly or indirectly benefited from a culture or system that has oppressed others? What sort of unexpected events might cause a reversal of fortunes, so that people who have been exploited gain power and resources previously denied them, while wealthy and powerful people who have oppressed others may lose their positions and assets? What was God's role in rebuilding the Israelites as they escaped from slavery?

### **2 Samuel 12:2-6**

*[Nathan told David a story about two men:] "The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for*

*the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." (For context, read 12:1-14.)*

God had bestowed on King David tremendous wealth and power, but David used those assets to satisfy his own selfish desires. He had the royal kingdom and multiple royal wives, but he saw a woman he wanted, the one and only wife of one of his army officers. He took her, because he could, and then, to cover up his abuse of power and preserve his political position, he arranged to murder the innocent husband of the woman he had defiled (vv. 7-9).

After Nathan declared that David had condemned himself by his reaction to Nathan's story, David admitted his guilt and heard what the consequences of his sin would be for himself, his family and his dynasty (vv. 10-14).

But the record does not tell us about the pain felt by Uriah's family and friends, or about the disappointment and blow to morale Uriah's fellow soldiers may well have felt after his untimely death at the hands of their commander-in-chief.

The rich man could not give back the poor man's lamb he had killed. David could not bring Uriah back to life, or restore the honor he had stolen from Bathsheba.

**Questions:** What does restorative justice look like, when something or someone much loved has been taken from their home and family?

How might Nathan's story apply to privileged people as a group who feel entitled to exploit those who are powerless to resist them?

How might the story of the rich man and the poor man sound different if told from the perspective of the poor man and his children?

### **Matthew 5:23-24**

*[Jesus said,] "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (For context, read 5:21-26.)*

Jesus teaches that our relationship with God cannot be divorced from our relationships with people. We can't expect God to accept our spiritual worship if we have injured people God made in God's image, unless we are willing to do what we can to make amends with those people we have harmed.

The way Jesus identifies the offended party is significant: he says we have to see those who have a grievance against us as, first and foremost, our brothers or sisters -- as members of our family who are hurting and who need healing.

The problem of broken relationships is a matter for God's people first. Jesus indicates that we may be performing a religious act when we recall that someone has an issue with something we said or did. This is not a problem we can lay at the feet of other individuals or institutions, if we are unwilling to take responsibility for our own role in our broken society.

The immediate application of this passage works when an individual has offended or hurt another individual. But do the same principles work when one group has offended or hurt another group?

**Questions:** What difference might it make in race relations in our nation if we who claim to follow Jesus viewed people of other races as our brothers and sisters?

How might you define and apply principles from this passage when one group of people have collectively harmed another group?

## **For Further Discussion**

1. Discuss this, from the Slavery, History, Memory, and Reconciliation Project website: "History ... is about using the tools of the past to make sense of the present and shape the future. ... Patterns of racial discrimination and persistent structural disadvantages do not occur in a vacuum; they exist in relationship to structural advantages for white Americans, advantages often codified in policy decisions over time, that originated in the institution of slavery. In order to move forward towards an America where one can live free from racial discrimination, prejudice, or preference, we must first acknowledge that slavery is part of our national story, our Jesuit story, the story of our schools and parishes, and is shaping the lives of African Americans to this day."
2. Read Nehemiah 2:1-9. Then compare and contrast how King Artaxerxes handled Nehemiah's request for support to restore his community with the way Pharaoh and the Egyptians handled Moses' request that they release the people from bondage (discussed above in the Exodus 12 passage in the scripture section). Which approach do you think was most beneficial for all parties involved?
3. Scan this article: "[Evanston, Illinois, Approves the Country's First Reparations Program for Black Residents.](#)" What can we learn from Evanston's approach that might be applicable in our faith communities? How might our experiences as communities of faith, and the biblical principles we hold dear, help us develop useful policies and procedures to address the needs and priorities of descendants of African American slaves?

## **Responding to the News**

This might be a good time to ask your church leaders how your local congregation or denomination has handled complaints or grievances in the past, and what policies, if any, are in place to handle such matters in the future. How committed is your church to truth-telling, transparency, learning from others, repentance when you are in the wrong, and humbly seeking to make amends to the extent it is in your power to do so?

### **Prayer Suggested by Isaiah 61:1-11**

O God, bringer of good news to the oppressed, who binds up the brokenhearted, frees the captives, and comforts all who mourn, reversing their fortunes from the ashes of death to the garlands of gladness, forgive us for the times we have used people and loved things, rather than loved people and used things.

Help us to work with you to repair lives, build up ruined communities and raise up families devastated for generations, that we may participate in restoring honor, justice and joy to those robbed of their lives and livelihoods, their pasts and their futures.

Through our words and deeds, O God, bless those who have long been devalued and dehumanized, that we may rejoice and praise your name together with them.

In Jesus' name. Amen.