

Podcast Transcript

October 2, 2022

Pentecost 17C (Disability Justice Series)

Scripture: Luke 17: (1-4) 5-10

Disability Justice: Your Life Is Not An Apology

<<Music:

“Building Up a New World,”

1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

Intro:

Welcome, friends, to *The Word Is Resistance*, a podcast of Showing Up for Racial Justice, or SURJ. This is the podcast where we explore the weekly Christian scripture readings with an eye toward racial justice and collective liberation.

My name is Nichola Torbett. I use she/her pronouns, and I’m recording this here in what is now known as Oakland, California. This is the unceded homeland of the Ohlone people who are still very much here and active and taking leadership in this movement town.

This podcast, as many of you know, is aimed at white Christians like me who want to respond to the call to dismantle white supremacy. We recognize that as white Christians, we have our own particular work to do - that it is our responsibility to learn how to resist the forces of white Christian supremacy from which we’ve benefitted and with which we are otherwise complicit. We are seeking to find and uproot white supremacy, settler colonialism, ableism, and other forms of oppression wherever they show up, including in our own Christian tradition. And in their place, we are sowing freedom dreams.

We are building up a new world.

That’s also the song you are hearing throughout this podcast. This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

And, as you ALSO may have heard, we’re doing a special series this summer, looking at the Luke passages through a disability justice frame. Disability justice is a framework that challenges the fundamental ableism of our culture—the privileging of people with certain bodies

and minds that fit some nonexistent idea of “normal.” Developed primarily by queer and trans* people of color, disability justice also calls attention to the way that ableism is all interconnected with white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. In other words, it recognizes that we live intersectional lives.

I’m super excited about this focus for our podcast because I find disability justice so *thoroughly* paradigm shifting. When we stop focusing on what is supposedly “wrong” with individual bodies and minds, those that we have labeled as “disabled,” and instead focus on how existing systems and structures *are disabling* of certain bodies and minds, and specifically those that do not adequately serve systems of power and profit, or that threaten to disrupt power, profit, or comfort—bodies and minds that point out the really inhospitable way we are living—well, that shift in focus really changes what we notice, what we long for, and what we can imagine, and from there, what becomes possible.

Last week, Reverend Anne started off by saying she was a little overwhelmed by all the things, and, wow, hard relate over here. What with the hurricanes and the heat waves and the flooding, and here in Oakland, a school shooting yesterday. Last week things were so dry here that the grasses along the freeway, right at our exit, caught fire, and then the fire jumped the freeway and burned down three houses in our neighborhood, and you know, apparently the economy is not doing so well, and on top of that there are the usual texts and emails and calls to respond to, and it never feels like what I am doing is enough. It always feels like I need to scramble faster, do more, or rather, it can feel like that, if I’m not constantly working to shift my perspective, to gain my spiritual sea legs, as my housemate Carol Robison calls them, so that I can make more considered moves.

So that’s what I want to talk about today: How do we get some spiritual equilibrium so that we can stop recreating the same racist, sexist, ableist, heteronormative conditions we’re accustomed to and have a chance at living into something new? We’re going to be looking at Luke 17: 1-10. (The lectionary is just verses 5-10, but I’m including the passage just before that for context.) Let’s turn there now.

<<timestamp 5:00>>

<<Music interlude, verse 1 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

OK, in just a moment, I’m going to read the scripture, but first I want to say that on a first read, I HATED this passage. Hated it. It didn’t even sound like Jesus to me. It sounded really judgey and depressing. It’s one of those passages where Jesus uses debt slavery as the context for a teaching story, and it just really, really got under my skin.

Truth be told, I wish Jesus had been clearer in condemning slavery. I really do. I mean, I know that debt slavery is not quite the same thing as the chattel slavery that brutalized the bodies and hearts of African and African-descended people stolen from their land and brought to this country, that decimated families and kinship networks and warped the soul of this nation from the very start. I know debt slavery was different, less permanent a state, if not less violent, but that didn't prevent slaveholders in our context AND their boosters from using the bible to justify the horrific acts that took place on this soil. So I wish Jesus had taken a clearer stand.

So before we read this text, let's take a breath here [[BREATHE]] let ourselves take in the scope of the harm that has been done with recourse to scripture. [[BREATHE]] The grief can feel overwhelming, but none of us is alone in it. I believe, I know, that Jesus grieves, too, at the uses to which his words have been put. God can hold our outrage, our overwhelm, and our heartbreak at what our ancestors of blood or heritage or tradition have been party to. Breathe.

Now, here's Luke 17: 1-10:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. 2 It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3 So watch yourselves.

"If your brother or sister[a] sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. 4 Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'?"

Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?

So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

So, like I said, I didn't love this text when I read it through the first time. At first blush, it seems like Jesus is saying that no matter what we do, no matter how hard we work, no matter how much we try, we will only just barely be doing what we ought because, you know, we're just slaves to God. Or something like that.

But that doesn't even really sound like Jesus, does it? At least not the Jesus I know, the poor son of a day laborer in a colonized country who knew all about hustle, hunger, and exhaustion from the underside.

And as I sat with this text, I just kept thinking about those enslaved people Jesus mentions, who had been out all day plowing or tending sheep and came into the house and then couldn't even have a bite to eat before having to prepare a meal for the master.

To be clear, that is not my situation. Not at all. I am sitting here in a cafe in the middle of a Thursday writing this.

But it is the situation of a LOT of people in this country, people who are working two and three minimum wage jobs to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table, who come home from one job to change uniforms and go to another and sometimes barely have time to grab a sandwich in between. There have been times in my life when I have lived that way.

Or, there are those who work hard all day, rush off to pick up a child, feed that child and put them to bed, and then work some more just to keep up.

I'm thinking of people who, when you ask them about their dreams, can't really think of anything because they've simply never had the leisure to imagine a different life, or who HAVE a clearly articulated dream but can just never, ever get to a secure enough place to take a step in that direction. They just keep hustling.

I think also of people who have to work extra hard to prove themselves and still will never pass muster because of the color of their skin or the ways their bodies and minds work. I think of the way women have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously in this world, and I think especially of women of color, who are expected not only to work twice as hard, but then on top of it, to take care of white people's feelings about it, and teach us about racism so that we can maybe do a little better even if we rarely do. The endless hustle of it. The hunger and the exhaustion.

I hear all of this in the scripture, and I can't think for even a moment that Jesus condones this arrangement. I mean, these debt slaves ARE the "little ones" that Jesus said no one should cause to stumble, right? And Jesus' original listeners, I think, would have gotten that. Most of the poor

people that tended to hang around Jesus would have known all about debt slavery, some of them through their own family members. It was very common for people to go so far into debt that they would have to attach themselves to a wealthy family and do untold amounts of labor to try to work off the debt. So those in the crowd would have identified with the enslaved people in Jesus' teaching. They would not have been confused.

No, I think actually it was my relative privilege that was getting my way, the first time I read this passage. Unlike Jesus' listeners, who would have identified with the enslaved people, I think at some level I identified with Jesus' *imagined* audience, the people he is pretending to be talking to, the wealthy heads of households, the ones he is picturing when he says, "Who among you would say to your slave, here, sit down, eat....?" Those are the people to whom he addresses his final statement: "'So *you also*, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

There is a gotcha moment here, right? Just as the listener is identifying with wealth, taking Jesus' invitation to imagine themselves into that role, and maybe thinking to themselves, "You better believe I would insist on my own meal first," Jesus says, "Ah, but you, too, are slaves. You, who have a mindset that divides the world into the leisure class and the laboring class, you are not free. You are in fact slaves to a way of thinking that assigns value to human beings according to their assets, that consigns people to hustle forever in order just to be okay, and no matter how much you do *from that mindset*, no matter how many charities you set up, no matter how much you give, you will only be doing what you ought, in other words, restoring the wealth to the people because it was never rightfully yours to begin with!"

I think Jesus is trying to jolt listeners out of one worldview and into another, out of a way of living that presumes eternal indebtedness and requires endless hustle in order to make up for just....you know...trying to survive, and into...another way...Let's turn there now.

<<Timestamp: 14:55>>

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>

<<"Courage, people,; don't get weary, though the way be long.">>

As I mentioned earlier, I can definitely fall into this sense of being perpetually behind and never doing enough. I guess workaholism would be one way to put it. I tend to load myself up with waaaaay too many projects. I don't know exactly why. Is it because I grew up with a single mom who was working three jobs and was exhausted much of the time, and I just figured that was how life was supposed to be? Or maybe it's because I used to give myself a long list of chores to do before she came home in the hopes that if I did all that work and she got to come home to a clean house, she would give me some attention. It could be these things, or it could just be living in a culture that tells us in all kinds of ways that we are not enough, that we need to make up for some unspecified but ever-present debt. I mean, that works well for capitalism, right? It keeps us

hustling, feeling uncertain of ourselves, being susceptible to marketing campaigns for products to improve ourselves.

When I had a corporate job, I used to pride myself on getting to the office early and staying late, putting in long hours as if banking up goodness so that if I made a mistake, which everyone does, hopefully my goodness account would cover it.

I think, actually, a lot of us live with this sense of being one mistake away from...you know...being cast into the outer darkness. We fear making mistakes, and underneath that, is this other murky feeling that maybe something about us...is a mistake, and so we are constantly in this position of having to make up for that.

There's a story I heard about this one time that took my breath away, took the breath away of everyone listening. I'm going to read you the version of it that appears in Sonya Renee Taylor's wonderful book *The Body Is Not An Apology*.

Taylor is writing about a trip she was on with her poetry slam team, which she describes as "a kaleidoscope of bodies and identities...., a microcosm of a world I would like to live in. We were Black, White, Southeast Asian. We are able-bodied and disabled. We were gay, straight, bi, and queer....We were complicated and honest with each other, and that is how I wound up in a conversation with my teammate Natasha, an early twentysomething living with cerebral palsy and fearful she might be pregnant....Instinctually, I asked Natasha why she had not used a condom with this casual sexual partner with whom she had no interest in procreating....Natasha told me her truth: "My disability makes sex hard already, with positioning and stuff. I just didn't feel like it was okay to make a big deal about using condoms."

Taylor goes on to say, "Her words pricked some painful underbelly of knowing in my own body. My entire being rang in resonance. I was transported to all the times I had given away my own body *in penance*."

In penance. It's this penance thing that interests me.

I wanted to read the verses leading up to today's scripture—the ones about forgiveness—because I think Jesus is talking here about notions of penance and forgiveness, debt and indebtedness, and who gets to be okay in this world and at what cost.

And this is what I'm getting: that when we are coming from this deep-seated belief in our own insufficiency, our indebtedness, our need to make up for something, we are kept enslaved to the way things are.

One day, back when I was working such long hours at for a corporate publisher, I remember my therapist posing the question: Who benefits from all these extra hours you are putting in?

I wasn't as politicized back then, but even then I knew immediately the answer: The Wall Street bankers who had just bought out our company. They were profiting from my extra hours, my notions of a goodness bank account, my fear that I wasn't good enough.

And you know what? Those fears were not unfounded. Work is precarious, and the owners of that company had never met me and had no reason to care anything about my well-being. And that was the system that was being strengthened and reinforced by every extra hour I worked.

I don't work in the corporate world anymore. I'm a dog walker and a petsitter, and I do a bunch of other gigs as I can get them, and I'm an activist, but you know what? I carried that same way of working into my activism. I'm still all about the hustle and the extra projects, and that's not entirely a bad thing. I like to think some good comes from the organizing and activism we do. But it's the sense of never being enough that I want to investigate, the sense of being indebted, because there's a way, then, that the work is still about my own ego, and about trying, somehow to be good enough.

I know so many burnt out activists and organizers trying to work out our salvation by doing good works, and lots of them. And in our burnout, in our exhaustion, I think we fall into old ways of treating each other and ourselves that end up reinforcing the very systems we are trying to dismantle.

I mean, it is true that as a white person I am indebted. I have benefitted from 245 years of stolen labor, not to mention the stolen land, and also the way labor continues to be stolen disproportionately from Black and Brown people in prisons.

So there is a debt, no doubt.

But debt slavery cannot be the way to pay it back. This leads only to the bankruptcy that Jesus is pointing out in his story about a master who is actually a slave. (If everyone is a subordinate, then no one is, right? The whole system is undercut.)

There has to be a different way. And this is where disability justice has been so helpful to me. People who are living with chronic illness, fatigue, and pain have been rethinking what it means to make a contribution to this world. They've been challenging the go go go culture of activism, the sense of urgency that drives so much of our work, and the focus on productivity—the actual product—to the exclusion of process, including the process of including everyone who's voice needs to be heard: “Nothing about us without us” is a disability justice slogan, and you know

what, we may not be able to get back to you today, if today is a sick day. We might not be able to get back to you this week. And so how do you rethink your process to accommodate that?

I don't think it's coincidental that a sense of urgency and a focus on product over process, or quantity over quality, are two of the characteristics of white supremacy culture identified by Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones in their groundbreaking work in the late 1990s. When we are operating from a sense of not being enough, we are susceptible to reinforcing these ways of being.

In the face of all this mess, Jesus urges a spirit of forgiveness—NOT placidity or indifference to a brutally unjust status quo, which he vividly calls out here, but gentleness toward ourselves and each other as we do the work of reimagining the world.

What if, some days, holding a prayer is your contribution? (I'm not talking about the cynical "thoughts and prayers" offered by politicians invested in perpetuating a rapacious economic system, but actual heartfelt giving of one's energy to the longing for a new way? What if presence—real, full, authentic, realness—is itself a contribution? What if grieving is a contribution? Or asking for help? Or sharing your vulnerability?

There are elders, there are people with disabilities, who change my world just by speaking from their perspective, just by breathing in and out and being who they are, even if none of that generates any profit....

What if your presence—real, open-hearted, genuine—being who you were created to be and loving with your whole heart...What if that is enough?

I don't know. Can I say this? Is this okay? Even writing this, I am worried that somehow I'm letting us off too easy, encourage white people, myself included, to, I don't know, take it easy and hope for the best, or something.

I don't know. But I do know that we are really hard on ourselves and each other, and that that is not contributing to more respect for each other, the earth, plants or animals or the waters that sustain us.

For a long time now, Bayo Akomolafe has been saying that our whole way of looking at the problem is part of the problem. And this harshness feels like a part of that.

A week or two ago, Daniel Foor, another of my spiritual teachers, was talking about fulfilling what we are here to do, our calling, so to speak, and he said something like, "What if you stopped focusing for a minute on what you think would have the most impact, and instead

focused on what would allow you to come with the fullest presence? Maybe that will lead you to something that ends up making a big impact.” It made me think about how the ego gets ahold of our best intentions and tries to use them for its own purposes, making ourselves seem important or good or at least okay, when we are starting from that place of deficit.

One other thing I know for sure is that if I want the freedom to do what allows ME to bring the fullest presence, I have to want that for everyone else, too. I have to want it for that minimum-wage worker working three jobs, for the single mom who can’t get a moment to herself, for the women of color who are expected to do it all and take care of everyone else in the process. In the words of Solomon Burke: “None of us is free if one of us is chained.”

In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul says, “For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm [or sit, or lie firm] therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” We have been set free, are being set free, for the freedom of others.

You know, I haven’t said a word yet about the most famous verse of this passage—that one about "faith the size of a mustard seed" and the awesome telekinetic ability to move a mulberry tree from the earth to the sea. There is a certain muscular interpretation of that verse that suggests that any problem we have can be traced to a lack of faith. But what if it’s not a mulberry tree, but our own arms or legs that we can’t move, or a cancer that won’t stop spreading, or fatigue that won’t lift, or depression or mania or trauma that just won’t let up. Is the problem a lack of faith? Are we just not “faithing” hard enough? What if it’s the boot of oppression that we can’t budge off our necks? And by the way, the mulberry tree is a stand-in for oppression; it’s associated with the wealth of Babylon and the silkworms that fed on its leaves, so there is an anti-empire focus here. The moving of a mulberry tree is about throwing off the trappings of empire, which suggests that this is not an individual faith that we need to somehow muscle up, but a communal commitment to the belief that another world is possible, and, in the spirit of Arundhati Roy, on a quiet day, if we get quiet enough, if we stop trying to work our way out of indebtedness, we can hear her breathing.

May it be so. Amen.

<<Timestamp 30:42>>

<<Music interlude, verse 1 of “Building Up a New World”>>

<<“Courage, people,; don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>

(Call to Action and Outro)

So, your call to action this week is pretty simple. It's just to reflect on whether you've become enslaved to, colonized by, the notion of indebtedness. Are there ways that you are acting this out with yourselves or others?

And then, what is the thing you can do, or the way you can be, with the most presence? When do you feel most authentically and fully...here? Can you get a little more time for that this week, even if it doesn't seem like it's going to bring about the revolution immediately? And as you engage that, can you ask that activity or that way of being what it wants to teach you about collective liberation? About freedom for those who are most under the boot?

If you'd like some excellent reading material along these lines, I can't recommend highly enough that you pick up a copy of Sonya Renee Taylor's book, *The Body Is Not An Apology*.

Oh, and also we wanted to let you know that we're having another listener meetup in a few weeks, where you can meet us contributors and each other and get a chance to chat about some of what's been coming up for you in these last months. Keep an eye on our social media or an ear or eye on these podcast episodes for details on how to register. We'd love to see you there.

That's what I've got for you this week, folks.

We'd love to hear what you think of this episode and of the work we're doing here generally. What are you making of it? How are your own movement struggles unfolding, and what are you learning from those? You can comment on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or you can fill out the survey on our podcast page at [surj dot org](http://surj.org). Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast.

You can find out more about SURJ at [surj dot org](http://surj.org). That's also where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links.

We appreciate your feedback very much and are especially eager to hear from BIPOC folks, people with disabilities, and people who are not Christian: How are we doing? What's working, and what's not? We'd love your input.

Finally, we want to thank our sound editor for this week, Claire Hitchins. Thank you so much, Claire!

That's it for now, friends. So many blessings to you for grounded accountability, deep transformation, and loving connection as we build up a new world. Until next time, I'm Nichola Torbett.

<<Timestamp 33:43 >>

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” verse 1>>

<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

RESOURCES

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture:

<https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>

REFERENCES

Burke, Solomon. “None of Us Are Free.” *Don’t Give Up On Me*. 2002

Taylor, Sonya Renee. *The Body Is Not An Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*. 2nd edition. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2018.

PERMISSIONS AND COPYRIGHT:

*"We Are Building Up a New Word," tune public domain, lyrics by Dr. Vincent Harding, used with permission of the Freeney-Harding family. Sung at NoEnemies movement choir practice, Denver, CO, December 7, 2014.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Revised Common Lectionary, Copyright © 1992 Consultation on Common Texts. Used by permission.