

Podcast Transcript

7.9.2023 and Pentecost 6A

- Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 and Psalm 45:10-17 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13 • Zechariah 9:9-12 and Psalm 145:8-14 • **Romans 7:15-25a** • Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
- Title: #WrestlingWithRomans - Who will rescue me from this body of death?
- Description: Consider with Rev. Liz Kearny all the ways we have felt hopeless or overwhelmed by despair when we realize how thoroughly systems of oppression have saturated our very ways of being. How does Paul make space for us in Romans 7 to get honest about that? What is the first step from those places of despair onto the pathway towards transformation?

Note: This podcast is for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, not the 3rd Sunday as Rev. Liz misspoke in this recording.

#WrestlingWithRomans #ResistingWhiteSupremacyCulture #ItsAProcessNotAMoment

Transcript available here: <https://surj.org/our-work/surj-faith/twir/>

<<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 and Transition:]

[Intro:]

Hi everyone. Welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we’re exploring what Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the context in which we are living today. Through Christian scripture and our various traditions, what support can we gather, especially as white folks, in finding our mutual interest in movements that liberate all of us?

My name is Rev. Liz Kearny. My pronouns are she/her.

I am an ordained Presbyterian Church U.S.A. pastor living in the occupied ancestral homelands of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in so-called Longview, Washington. I’m a member of the SURJ Faith organizing team and I’m so glad to be back with you for this 6th Sunday after Pentecost as we continue #WrestlingWithRomans!

This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians engaging with other white Christians in conversations about challenging every system that threatens life. We believe white Christians have a responsibility to commit ourselves to resisting white supremacy, settler colonialism, the cishetero-patriarchy, antisemitism, ableism, and every system of oppression that stands in the way of our collective thriving. We are called to

show up and disrupt these powers and principalities wherever we find them, especially through the Christian tradition.

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 Freaney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

[Transition:]

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>
<<“Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.”>>

[Main Content:]

I invite you to ground with me in some words and a breath prayer from the incomparable Cole Arthur Riley of Black Liturgies. She shared these words the weekend of Juneteenth. After a windfall of Supreme Court decisions this last week that are bent on attacking the personhood of our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color siblings and threatening the very existence of our queer beloveds, it can feel impossible to hang on to our gritty dreams of liberation for all creation. And so I found these words to be reinvigorating in the midst of it all...

“Do not fall asleep in your enemy’s dream,” Cole Arthur Riley writes, quoting John Edgar Wideman. “Be careful who you let regulate your hope. Liberation is after you. And all dreaming is dangerous to those who benefit from our numbness.

Inhale: There is more for us.

Exhale: God, protect my dreaming.

Inhale: There is more for us.

Exhale: We get free together.”¹

In our passage from Romans today, some scholars who I tend to agree with believe that Paul is using a rhetorical device called *prosopopeia*, or speech-in-character.² Paul is not speaking autobiographically in the words you are about to hear. We know this because, as Dr. Pam Eisenbaum puts it, “Paul clearly regards himself as capable of adequately resisting sin”³ from his

¹ Cole Arthur Riley, @BlackLiturgies Instagram page, post from June 17, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CtmJrinuEWN/>

² Dr. Pamela M. Eisenbaum, *Invitation to Romans: Participant Book: A Short-Term DISCIPLE Bible Study*, pg 68

³ Eisenbaum, *Invitation to Romans*, pg. 68

words in Philippians 3:4-6. There Paul comments on his background as a faithful, life-long Jew, saying, “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” And that’s not at all the same person we will encounter speaking here, in Romans 7. Instead, Paul is speaking like a member of his Roman Gentile audience, “imagining what it feels like,” Dr. Eisenbaum writes, “to be a Gentile encountering the law for the first time and being indicted by the law for idolatry, the sin of sins!”⁴ Let’s open ourselves now to this moment in Paul’s imagination in Romans chapter 7, verses 15-25a:

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched [person] that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Right as I was learning about this rhetorical effort of Paul to empathize with his Gentile audience, I had the painful and frankly embarrassing experience during the month of June of having Instagram remind me of the things I reposted to my Instagram stories 3 years ago, when the 2020 uprising was in full swing after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. I cringed as these came through my Instagram memory feed not because I don’t stand by their meaning, but because I could feel again in my body the emotional state that led me to fervently post and re-post so many social justice memes, videos, and thought posts coming from Black Lives Matter movement leaders at that time. And sure, it’s good that I was spreading the word, but the frenzied state I was in still had *me* at the center of it all. In that season, I no longer felt able to easily ignore my complicity in systems of white supremacy, and that led to intense feelings of shame. That was followed by an immediate and desperate urgency to crawl out of that shame into some made-up place I hoped really existed called “finally being a good white person.” It was a desperate energy I hear expressed in Romans 7, verse 24: “Wretched [person] that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” You would have thought from my Instagram account back then that I could social-justice-meme-reshare my way out of that feeling of wretchedness.

⁴ Eisenbaum, *Invitation to Romans*, pg. 71

At the time, I believed that the gospel, the good news, was centered on God's grace for all creation. But somehow the work of justice God was calling me to was like one side-path of that grace - important, yeah, but not quite at the center of what it meant for me to follow Jesus. I'd been exposed to an analysis of systems of oppression in my last year of seminary in a critical race theory class, and that felt pretty new to me back then. I was in that class when I joined my first Black Lives Matter marches with my fellow seminary students in Princeton, New Jersey in solidarity with the uprisings in Ferguson after Mike Brown's murder by the police and the refusal by those in charge to indict the officers who murdered him. At that time in my journey, I wasn't allowing those experiences to penetrate my way of being. And then, in my early time as a parish pastor coming right out of seminary, I can remember seeing headlines about white supremacist rallies in Charlottesville or seeing the news of yet another Black sibling murdered by police, and if I'm really honest, my main reaction at that time was, "Oh no, I should probably find a way to address this in my sermon that's already written for Sunday..." My main motivation was appearing 'woke' enough to my colleagues on social media. I so desperately wanted to be good. And I think that even then, I knew what I was avoiding. On some level, I think I understood that once I really grappled with the idolatry of white supremacy in my own life and the various systems of oppression I participated in to keep it functioning, it would mean my entire purpose and way of being would need to be flipped upside-down. It would mean a transformation right down to the root system of my life. It would mean never seeing things the same way again, and the first step in the process would be realizing how completely systems of oppression were at work in my own body.

I feel like this passage in Romans 7 is Paul's way of making some space for feelings like that. I've been wondering if it was his attempt to empathize with the Roman Gentiles he was trying to bring into the resistance movement that has always been central to Jewish identity. He must have known that the first step in their transformation was probably going to include an initial experience of shame and despair, realizing just how soaked through their lives were with the idolatry that is essential when cooperating with the Roman empire. Remember, the Jews *been* resisting empire, from the very beginning. Ancestor Abraham committed to follow the one God whose ways of life will always be at odds with the empire's systems of death. And as was made clear to Abraham, he would be the parent of *many* nations, not one nation. "Gentiles," Dr. Eisenbaum writes, "demonstrate their faith in God not by becoming Jews but by trusting in God's promises..."⁵ And on the way to living into those promises, one learns about the good law of God found in the Torah that is intended to bring all of us into life, and that can reveal just how many ways empire has soaked into our way of being. Just a couple verses before our passage today, Paul says, "Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure" (Romans 7:13). That verb, "might be shown" is the Greek word *phainō*. It can mean to be "exposed to view... to meet the eyes, strike

⁵ Eisenbaum, *Invitation to Romans*, pg. 71

the sight, become clear or manifest...⁶ For transformation to occur, Paul is saying, it will begin with sin in our lives being exposed to view, made manifest. It will begin with no longer being able to easily ignore one's complicity in systems of empire. And that will probably feel, at first, like real and utter despair.

Rev. Anne Dunlap has said that switching out the word "sin" in Romans with "white supremacy" can help us connect today to what Paul was calling his audience to in this letter. And boy, that feels true to me. The last 3 years have left very little in my way of being unilluminated by the blacklight of seeing oppression's reach in my life. So far, it's been a painful - albeit liberating - process of trying to unpack where I end and white supremacy culture begins. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Yup. That's what it feels like. It started with understanding the rotten roots of policing, but it continued when I realized just how much I have been trained by our society - and especially by white evangelical Christianity and its insistence on substitutionary atonement - to believe that punishment can heal harm. It started with beginning to question capitalism and it continued when I began to understand that allegedly neutral practices like saving for retirement through investments in the stock market are not neutral at all. It is impossible for our money to make more money without exploiting another beloved's labor or harming the earth or hoarding wealth at the expense of some other being's ability to live. As I've gone through this flipping-my-life-upside-down journey, I know that what I want is God's way of thriving for every corner of creation. I want everyone to have free and accessible healthcare and plenty of food and pleasure and belonging and healing that does not rely on punishment. But at every turn, there's systemic barriers that make it impossible to be quoteunquote "pure" to be in the midst of these systems. And it's overwhelming. "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand," I say to myself whenever I find yet another part of my life that is soaked through with the empire's values. "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin [i.e. white supremacy and other systems of oppression] that dwells in my members."

I feel deep gratitude to Paul for giving me space here to be really honest about what it has felt like to be a newcomer to movements that resist empire. Because transformation is not a light switch that we turn on. It is a non-linear process. An unfolding. Some might call it "a hot mess". White supremacy and capitalism and ableism and antisemitism and settler colonialism and the cishetero-patriarchy and all the ways of being that lead to one being dominating another don't just swirl around us externally. Rather, as Paul points out, they are insidious in the ways they start to "dwell within" us, in our very "members," alive and at work in our very "flesh". That's why our resistance of these systems will be, as Rev. Jean Jeffress put it so perfectly in last week's episode, "a whole thing... it's a life to live."⁷

⁶ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5316/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

⁷ Rev. Jean Jeffress, The Word Is Resistance podcast, *TWIR 6.25.23 #WrestlingWithRomans: Live Recording at NCNCUCC Annual Gathering* (with Nichola Torbett),

And I feel even deeper gratitude to Paul for one verse in this passage in particular, that is like the hinge on the door to the world I'm longing to be a part of. Just after he writes in imagined Gentile Roman voice, "Wretched [person] that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?", he says "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Yeah, Liz, so what? Well, if we read carefully, we find that throughout Paul's imagined crying out as a Gentile newly realizing their thorough saturation with the empire's ways of being, that person was speaking only of "I" and "me". "I do not understand *my* own actions. For *I* do not do what *I* want, but *I* do the very thing *I* hate...." Inherent in this despairing crying out was a feeling of individualism and isolation, of separation from community. Which is how most shame-spiraling feels, doesn't it? Laying awake at night, lonely in a swirl of thoughts of overwhelm. Doom-scrolling on social media when I should be asleep, confronted with all the ways I don't feel like I am enough to meet the devastation happening in the world around me. Alone in figuring out what to do next.

And that's why that very next verse is so powerful to me. For I hear Paul inviting us into an unmistakably new orientation in just 4 words - "Jesus Christ our Lord." I mentioned a couple episodes ago that that word for "Lord" in Greek is *kyrios*, the name Caesar insisted that his subjects call him. So when Paul calls Jesus *kyrios*, he means that following Jesus is a life in defiance to Caesar and his empire. And Paul doesn't say "Jesus Christ *my* Lord," but "*our* Lord." The first step out of that despair that makes us feel alone and lost in shame and utterly unworthy is a step *into community*. That word - *our* - is the reminder that as we seek to live within these systems while being in defiance to them, we are never, ever, ever alone in figuring out what that looks like. Ancestors like Abraham and Jesus came before us. There are siblings all around us who long for the same world we long for, if we will only open up to each other with enough vulnerability to find real solidarity. We will hear more from Paul in the chapters to come about the kinds of practices and ways of being that constitute this community of transformation we are being called into, but for now, right here, Paul invites us into a moment of surrender. A moment of saying "Yes" to walking away from the empire's ways however we can and walking towards practices that return us to each other and to the earth, and really, to ourselves. A moment of entrusting ourselves to a community who will be in the mess of transformation alongside us, as we pull apart every way that oppression has started living in our bodies and remind each other that we belong to the God who is love.

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>
<<"Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>

[Call to Action and outro:]

[Call to Action:]

I have a two-fold call to action for each of us this week. First, ask yourself: What is one area of your life where you still feel despair when you think about trying to resist oppression in specific

<https://soundcloud.com/thewordisresistance/twir-62523-wrestlingwithromans-live-recording-at-n-cucc-annual-gathering>

and meaningful ways? Is there a part of your life where it has felt too impossible or hopeless to walk away from the empire's values of greed and individualism and scarcity-thinking? Write that place of stuckness down on a piece of paper that you can put on your bathroom mirror, or somewhere you will see it every day. And just under it, write those words from Romans 7:25a - "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" *Our Lord*. Can you practice every day this week naming the despair and hopelessness you feel, and then surrendering even that impossible place to the God who has promised to never leave us nor forsake us? Can you ask God to make good on God's promise to make a way for you in the context of community to live out God's ways of life?

And then, part 2: Commit to showing up to at least one in-person or virtual gathering of folx who are seeking this kind of world too. That might be the next meeting of your local SURJ chapter. Or perhaps the campaign planning meeting in your town or city being organized by BIPOC leaders to create more just conditions in the place you call home. Or - I've got two coming up where I'll join you! - sign up for SURJ Faith's next Community Safety For All toolkit gathering on Tuesday, July 18th at 5pm PT / 8pm ET! At that gathering, we will get together to discuss tangible ways of keeping each other safe in the midst of rising authoritarianism, attacks on queer and trans beloveds, anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric, as well as the censoring of books and school curricula, all of which is leading to more acts of violence against faith communities that are resisting. You can sign up for that Zoom gathering by filling out a simple online form on the SURJ website that I'll include in the resources section of this transcript. That form will allow you to receive the Community Safety For All toolkit and you'll be added to the email list to get the registration for the event. Our hope is that joining this gathering will help all of us feel less alone and isolated as we face these powers and principalities together, and that we will each walk away with the next small step we can take in the direction of faithful resistance.

And, if you are in my denomination - the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. - join Presbyterians For Abolition, a working group of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, for an open house to hear more about how to engage your own congregation using the Community Safety for All toolkit! That Zoom event will be taking place on Thursday, July 13th at 5pm PT/8pm ET and you'll get to hear directly from Rev. Anne Dunlap about what this toolkit has to offer us as we practice real safety with our people. I'll include the registration link for that event in the resources section of this transcript as well.

[Outro:]

Thanks as always for joining us. We'd love to hear from you all, and especially folks of color and non-Christian folks, by commenting on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or filling out the survey on our podcast page at surj dot 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, where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links. Next week we'll have a resistance word from a brilliant theologian and human being, Brigitta Vieyra. And finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor, Claire Hitchens! We appreciate you so much!

Again, I'm Rev. Liz Kearny, and it is one of the greatest privileges in my life to dream and conspire with you about liberation through this podcast.

Let's close with the same breath prayer from Cole Arthur Riley that we opened with, to remind us of where we are going and who we belong to...

Inhale: There is more for us.

Exhale: God, protect my dreaming.

Inhale: There is more for us.

Exhale: We get free together.

<<Verse 3 of "Building Up A New World, Verse 1 repeated.>>
<<"Rise, Shine, Give God glory, Children of the Light"
We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.>>

~ ~ ~

RESOURCES:

[Click here](#) to sign up to receive SURJ Faith's Community Safety For All (CS4A) toolkit! [Read here](#) about the toolkit's purpose.

[Click here](#) to register for Presbyterians For Abolition's open house featuring Rev. Anne Dunlap sharing about the Community Safety For All (CS4A) toolkit!

~ ~ ~

REFERENCES:

Cole Arthur Riley, @BlackLiturgies Instagram page, post from June 17, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CtmJrinuEWN/>

Dr. Pamela M. Eisenbaum, *Invitation to Romans: Participant Book: A Short-Term DISCIPLINE Bible Study*, Abingdon Press (August 1, 2012)

Word study translation taken from <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5316/rsv/mgnt/0-1/>

TWIR 6.25.23 #WrestlingWithRomans: Live Recording at NCNCUCC Annual Gathering (with Rev. Jean Jeffress and Nichola Torbett),
<https://soundcloud.com/thewordisresistance/twir-62523-wrestlingwithromans-live-recording-at-n-cncucc-annual-gathering>

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.