

Podcast Transcript

9.10.2023 15th Sunday After Pentecost

Title: Dear Romans, We Belong to Each Other. Love, Paul.

- [Exodus 12:1-14](#)
- [Psalm 149](#)
- [Ezekeil 33:7-11](#)
- [Psalm 119:33-40](#)
- [Romans 13:8-14](#)
- [Matthew 18:15-20](#)

<<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:

- Hello everyone, welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we’re exploring what our Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the times in which we are living today. What do our sacred stories have to teach us, as white folks, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in liberation?
- What wisdom is there for us as white Christians in these troubled, violent times of pandemics, rising authoritarianism, and racial capitalism? What beauty can we find in our resistance?
- I’m Rev. Jean Jeffress, pronouns they/them/theirs pronouns. I’m a United Church of Christ minister serving as the Associate Pastor at Plymouth United Church of Christ, the Jazz and Justice church in the ancestral and unceded land of the Ohlone people here in what is currently known as Oakland, CA.
- This podcast is a project of SURJ-Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians – white Christians turning towards other white Christians to talk about race and white supremacy. We believe white Christians like us, like me, have a responsibility to commit ourselves to *resisting* white supremacy, and also we believe we have a responsibility to tell a new story about Christianity for white christian folks. Because our lives, all our lives, depend on it.
- *And we do this work remembering* “We are building up a new world.” 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.
- The Word is Resistance.

Welcome to the 300th episode of THE WORD IS RESISTANCE podcast! Wild right? The first episode, #ReclaimMLK, dropped in January of 2017. I joined the crew during Advent of 2019. My contributions have been a bit more sparce than some of the other contributors, but I consider it an honor to be a part of this body of work. What listeners will find here at TWIR is an excellent resource of lectionary preaching, or for anyone searching for an anti-oppression/antiracist read on the text. Listeners will also find deep scholarship and exegesis, thoughtful reflection, vulnerable storytelling and work that you will probably not hear from most

pulpits. Sending so much gratitude to Rev. Anne Dunlap, who coordinates this podcast and does the administrative work to make it happen. Thank you, Rev. Anne. We've had a handful of contributors and sound people over these 5 years. Sending so much gratitude to all the contributors amazing work of the podcast crew and for the diligence and patience of the sound folks. I went back through and found as many names as I could. The 300th episode seems like a good time to give everyone a shout out. Here goes:

Rev. Anne Dunlap
 Rev. Drew Bongiovanni
 Rev. Margaret Anne Ernst
 Rev. Will Green
 Rev. Sarah Howell Miller
 Nichola Torbett
 Dr. Sharon Fennema
 Blyth Barnow
 Allyn Steele
 John Bergen
 Grace Aheron
 Havin Herrin
 Rev. Seth Wispleway
 Rev. Sarah Jordan
 Brigitta Vieyra
 Rev. Claire Brown
 Rev. Kelsey Beebe
 M Jade Kaiser
 Audrey Gale
 Rev. Liz Kearny
 And yours truly
 And on sound, Max Pearl, Claire Hitchins, Jordan Perry and Matt Reno.

Thank you to every single one of you, and if I missed someone, I apologize. However, you know who you are and I'm sending out a huge swath of gratitude.

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

So, we here at THE WORD IS RESISTANCE are still wrestling with Romans; rolling around on the floor with Romans trying to get it in a headlock and sometimes ending up in a headlock ourselves. I've listened twice to the entire #WrestlingwithRomans series. Some of the episodes I've listened to 3 times. I created a single document of all the transcripts thus far and have read through it twice. This is a truly incredible body of work. The scholarship is impressive; the reflections are deep and vulnerable; the stories about people's lives are so interesting. And I've also been moved by my podcrew contributors sharing their process, frustrations, and their all-to-real stories of becoming confused and reconfused by the confusing and reconfusing nature of this ancient and difficult piece of mail that became scripture. As Daniel Kirk says in his book

Romans for Normal People, Romans is the “most misused, problematic and prooftexted letter in the Bible.”

We drop into Romans today in chapter 13:8-14. We’ve already been given the cultural and political context for Romans in the previous episodes. We’ve already heard thoughtful and detailed scholarship including word studies, detailed analysis of Paul’s theological arguments and use of scripture. I don’t have much to add to all of that. My podcrewmates have done an excellent job and everything one needs for a life-giving and liberative read and interpretation of Romans has already been said. What I’m going to do is simply review some of the points that have already been made as a way of working up to chapter 13, then I’ll just tell you what I think. Amen? Amen.

Here is the reading for today:

Romans 13:8-14

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Seven or 8 years ago, I attended the installation service of Rev. Dr. Diane Weible who was, at that time, the new Conference Minister of the NCNC, the Conference where I serve as a pastor. She has since moved on with her career. The preacher for that service was the Rev. Dr. John Dorhauer, the former General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. He has since moved on in his career. Anyway, he preached on one of Paul’s letters. I don’t remember which one, and I remember almost nothing from the sermon... almost. But he did say one thing that was, for me, a very important takeaway message. He said something like, Paul was not trying to convince us that we all have to accept each other, Paul was trying to convince us that there is a God who has already accepted all of us and that is where our focus ought to be. I’m paraphrasing, of course. He may have say love each other, or something else each other, but the point is, the action is God’s and God is the one upon whom we need to focus when working together to unify God’s people. At least that is what my brain has made of what Dr. Dorhauer said in that sermon, and I have hung my hat on that for all these years. So, thank you, Dr. Dorhauer, for that.

We heard from Rev. Anne in her episodes that one of the main messages of the letter to Romans is the sovereignty of God over that of Caesar. God unifies us around love and belonging because there is no real unity in the ways of empire. And if what we’re striving for is faith that elicits

action in the form of a general ethic of not being assholes to each other based on trusting in a God to whom we all already belong, then it doesn't matter if I accept you or even like you, I'm committed to behavior that supports belonging. And that, I think, is the point of Paul's argument regarding the faith of Abraham we hear from both Rev. Anne, and Rev. Liz. Anne told us that Abraham chose to trust in the promises of God and was circumcised, a behavior that embodied that trust. Liz told us that when Paul talks about being justified by faith, rather than meaning we can be assholes and reject people we don't think have the right kind of faith, it means, "[we are] woven into the lineage of faithful resisters of empire that came before us." Which, turns out, the ancient Israelites needed to be for millennia, even before Rome rose to power.

And Paul is not an idiot. He understands power dynamics. He understands that the unifying these folks, Jewish and gentile, even given that God is the one who unifies, is subject to social and political influences. We have learned the context for this letter; that a few years prior to the writing of Romans, Jewish people had been expelled from Rome only starting to return about a year prior to the writing of Romans. So, the Jesus-following community had been growing in Rome for some time without the influence of the Jewish followers. In his book, *The Arrogance of Nations*, Neil Elliot writes, "when the Judeans who had been expelled...were allowed to return...much of the community life they had previously known was in disarray." And what we glean from chapter 11 is that the gentile followers were getting a little full of themselves thinking, perhaps, they had replaced the Jewish Jesus followers because not all the Jewish people were following Jesus. We glean this about the gentile followers because Paul literally has to answer the question, "Has God rejected God's people? Certainly not!" Paul fervently, even desperately believed there is unity in Christ, for all people. ALL. Now, that sounds really Christian, and in the 21st century it is. But for Paul, what that means was that in Christ Jesus, the promises of the God he had followed his whole life, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, the promise that the whole world, all the nations, would be reconciled to God. And Paul believed, through Christ, this was going to happen in his lifetime. Paul was dealing with animosity in Romans; the outcast Judeans returning, probably traumatized and perhaps resentful, to rejection from the people who were reclaiming their same God. It's a hot mess. But Paul, ever-dedicated to that God who has already accepted us all, to whom we all belong, presses on.

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

So, what have we got so far? We have learned that Paul was not a Christian, he did not convert. He did believe in Christ, which sounds really Christian, but he believed in Christ as the manifestation of the promises of the God of his tradition, Judaism. He believed Christ would come back, soon, and fulfill the promises of a unified world, of all the nations coming together under a God of love and belonging. He taught that faith manifested in behaving like we trust in a God who has already accepted us all and to whom we all belong. He understood that this unity in which he believed was not just going to happen, that the needs of the vulnerable would need to be addressed, thus imploring the Roman believers to stop being haughty and acting like there

were better than they were and better than the Jewish believers. Paul believed that the invitation to follow the God of his understanding, was an invitation to resist worldly ways, ways of empire that are contrary to the reality that we belong to God and to each other. I think that is what Paul means in chapter 12 when he says “do not be conformed to this world.” Do not submit to the ways that separate us from each other and from God. And when Paul talks about salvation, he’s talking about making the whole world right, repairing the world, not individual salvation. As Rev. Liz taught us from Dr. Pamela Eisenbaum, “Paul’s letter to the Romans is not an answer to the question, How can I be saved? Rather it is his answer to the question, How will the world be redeemed, and how do I faithfully participate in that redemption?”

So where are we now? Chapter 13 start off with the whole “be subject to the governing authorities. Well, it’s easy to see how that can be misused. In the Jewish Annotated New Testament, the commentary notes that the specific authorities are not named. It could be temple authorities which would quoteunquote, “...one of the ways that these Gentile are instructed to live respectfully toward Jews is to accept the authority of the Jewish communal leaders.” When this section goes on to talk about paying taxes, it could very well be the temple taxes. And that would make sense given where the reading picks up at verse 8.

“Owe no one anything” is where we pick up. I think this could very well mean, respect the communal life here. Submit to the authorities of this community, and pay your damn dues. In other words, it’s not owing anybody anything, it’s communal life. And the point of communal life is to love each other, and loving each other fulfills the law. And Paul goes back to the Decalogue, what we call the 10 commandments, the dos and don’ts of being God’s people. “And besides”, Paul says, “you know what time it is.” It’s time to start behaving like we trust in a God who has already done the work of accepting all of us, all of us, all of us. The point of all of this is to behave like we belong to each other because that’s what it means to be God’s people. Because, Paul points out, salvation, the redemption of the world and our participation in that redemption is near, very near, and I think what Paul wanted these ancient people and wants us to understand is that because of God in Christ we belong to God and to each other, like really super duper extra deeply, meaningfully, so very importantly, I-need-you-all-to-understand-this-is-the-point, to behave like we belong to each other, to resist the ways of the world that oppose belonging, that God, not Caesar will save us and that this is how redemption happens, when we behave like we trust in a God who has already gathered us in, when we behave like we belong to each other, when we welcome the stranger, when we center the vulnerable, when we divest from harmful ways of being, when we behave like, as Lynice Pinkard say, that we are not individually salvageable. Salvation means all and all means all.

Romans is a love from Paul to God’s people saying I love you all so much I want to understand the overwhelming love of God in Christ; I want you to participate in the redemption of the whole world, and I want you to get your shit together and act like you belong to this God who loves you, and for God’s sake act like you belong to each other. Dear Rome. We belong to each other. Love, Paul. Amen.

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

My call to action this week, since I think I've focused on countering an anti-Jewish read of Romans this time, is to study your Hebrew Bible. Do some word studies or study the Talmud. And since it's just about time for the Jewish high holidays, check in with your local synagogue. See if they need security for their special services. Organize some Christian allies to stand watch. I did this before the pandemic. It was a wonderful experience.

Thank you so much for joining me from wherever you are in this world today. Let us know how your action goes – we'd love to hear from you all – by commenting on our Soundcloud, Twitter or Facebook pages. Tune in for a resistance word from Dr. Sharon Fennema.

You can find out more about SURJ at surj.org, and our podcast lives at Soundcloud; search on "The Word Is Resistance." We're also on Spotify. Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. Transcripts are available as well on our website, which include references, resources, and action links. Finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor this week, Claire Hitchins! Thank you, Claire!!

(Words of blessing/encouragement)

- Blessings to you in all that you do.
- Love and liberation to you all
- Until next time. I'm Jean Jeffress.

<<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.>>

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RESOURCES

REFERENCES:

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