

Podcast Transcript

5.7.2023 5th Sunday After Easter

- [Acts 7:55-60](#)
- [Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16](#)
- [1 Peter 2:2-20](#)
- [John 14:1-14](#)

<<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 people, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in liberation?
- Our theme music, *We are building up a new world* is Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement sung by a multi-racial “movement choir practice in Denver CO in December 2014. It was led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.
- I’m Rev. Jean Jeffress. I use she and they pronouns. I’m a pastor in the United Church of Christ in Northern CA. I live in what is now called the city of Oakland which exists on the unseated and ancestral lands of the Ohlone people who are still here, living on and praying for this land. This podcast is a project of SURJ-Faith and is particularly designed for white people, white Christians – the idea is that white people will talk to other white people about race and white supremacy. We believe white people like me, have a responsibility to commit ourselves to *resisting* white supremacy, to speaking up and showing up and disrupting white supremacy where we find it, including in our own Christian tradition. We’d love to hear from you and especially from people of color, and from listeners all faith traditions who might be checking us out. Let us know how we’re doing.
- The Word is Resistance.

Today is a grey day here in Oakland, CA. I’m sitting in my living room surrounded by books and my 2 sleeping cats. I do love a grey day. It matches my mood and makes time with the cats seem that much more cozy. This grey day also helps me to contemplate our Eastertide theme: #Failurelab. Here at THE WORD IS RESISTANCE, we are looking at and talking about some of our shortcomings, our failures, as it were, in racial justice and anti-oppression work. In progressive and movement circles, we’re always trying to get it right. It’s understandable. Nobody wants to be called out or canceled or lose credibility in their circle of influence. Thing is, if we can’t get it wrong, and if we’re unable to have nuanced conversations, then we cannot learn and grow and get better at the work. In other words, we need to be able to talk about the times we got it wrong, the times that we didn’t know better, and if we’re humble, willing to learn and listen, then we can grow and do better and be better. Failure is a harsh word but #Failurelab is much more catchy than #learningfromourfuckingmistakes, which is, I pray, what we are all doing as we do this work.

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

Today’s passage is from the book of Acts 7:55-60. It is a rather brutal scene depicting the stoning of Stephen, who is anachronistically called the first Christian martyr.

Here is Acts 7:55-60

⁵⁵ But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” ⁵⁷ But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. ⁵⁸ Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. **8** ¹ And Saul approved of their killing him.

Stephen was someone in the early Jesus movement who was selected among other disciples and the new followers to care for the Hebrew widows. We are told in previous verses that he did great wonders and signs and that some other members of the synagogues lied about him to set him up as a blasphemer, something punishable by stoning. And so, he is dragged before the Sanhedrin where he proceeds to give a long speech illustrating how the prophets from their tradition had been persecuted right up to Jesus. Then Stephen blames this judging body, the Sanhedrin of murdering Jesus. Well, they didn’t like that, and also, just to be totally clear, they did not kill Jesus, Rome did. After the speech, Stephen dies in a hail of stones flung at him by the people who set him up. This text is a land mine for anti-Jewish interpretations, and while this episode is not focusing on that in particular, I did want to name it. Okay, I’ll unpack it a little. Stephen was not rejecting Judaism. He was not a Christian. He was arguing from a specific expression of his faith tradition which was the same tradition as those with whom he argued. It’s like one Protestant arguing with members of another Protestant church, but one church is more powerful so its members decide to commit an act of violence against the one with whom they are arguing. This does not seem very far fetched in today’s deeply polarized religious climate.

So, that’s what happened to Stephen. But all the while there was this fella in the crowd named Saul. Saul didn’t throw any stones, but it looks as though he watched everyone’s coats while they hurled stones at Stephen. Saul didn’t do the violence, but he facilitated it, and then at the end of the passage, we are told that Saul approved of them killing him. I think we all know that Saul, the coat-watching persecutor of Jesus followers, became known as Paul. And that Paul, through a revelation with the resurrected Jesus, became known as the apostle to the gentiles, spreading the Jesus following movement and helping Jesus following communities until his death in about 64bce. Paul did not get canceled, but perhaps Paul would tell this story on his #Failurelab episode if he were here today. Paul did not found the Christian church as there was no Christianity then. But Paul had a relationship with and a love for those early churches. I also have a relationship to and a love for the church. And the capital C church is so deeply filled up to its eyeballs with #Failure when it comes to anti-oppression work.

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

A young person I encountered in a church setting not long ago named that, at least here in the U.S., we have allowed the worst aspects of our Christian tradition to have the loudest voices. A teenager said this. What swirls around in my head pretty much all the time is the wave of anti-trans legislature spreading across the country. It's on my mind because it affects many of my friends, plus it's fucking terrifying and fascist as fuck. And it's wrapped up in Christian patterned wrapping paper. Florida with its statewide bathroom ban, exerting control over university curricula and plunging into medical records. Missouri trying to impose outrageous restrictions on gender-affirming medical care; last I checked a judge was blocking that law but it's here nonetheless. And there is so much more, I cannot keep up with over 300 bills and measures passing and in process.

I was at a gathering of trans and nonbinary people a while back. I only knew one person so in the process of meeting others the question, "so, what do you do?" came up. "I'm a pastor," I said. "Oh," was said in response. I live in a bubble of queer pastors and church goers, but I think many queer and trans people, with good reason, have a healthy suspicion of the church. So, for better or worse, (I sort of feel like worse), I brought up my denomination's love letters to trans youth campaign. I showed the webpage on my phone. Somebody said, with the stiltedness of disappointed surprise, "Well.... I guess it's better than nothing." I tried to launch into how it's good that a church is making this statement and it helps trans kids in the church know that our church will not reject them. And that's true, and it is good in its context. But I failed in that moment to truly understand my privilege. I identify as nonbinary, but it's also authentic for me to be she. I like using both pronouns interchangeably because it expresses my belief that gender really is fluid. But it gives me privilege as well. It's like when white people can put themselves out there and take risks for racial justice, then if we want to, at any time, we can just go back to being white. I can just go back to being she. So, my little churchy love notes don't necessarily mean a lot to people who are living under existential threat.

And then there is the church itself whose potential I am so desperately in love with but who can also be so disappointing. I wonder, sometimes, sort of jokingly but sort of not, if my relationship to the church is codependent as I am ever waiting for the church to change and it does not and I go back anyway. In my denomination, the United Church of Christ, when a church is Open and Affirming, that means the church is intentionally welcoming to LGBTQ people. There is a process churches go through to become Open and Affirming. A church where I served went through that process and said they were Open and Affirming, yet when it came time to talk about putting banners up at the church, someone said we can't put up rainbow banner up because people will think we are a gay church. This was in the context of a meeting about being welcoming and church growth. As the only gay person in the room, and with no real ally in the meeting with me, I did not know what to say. I argued the Open and Affirming point. It went now where because the meaning was not understood in the first place. I was trying to figure out if I was supposed to be being pastoral. Many more people-will-think-we-are-a-gay-church type things were said. This was new for me. I came to church and seminary later in life and had the privilege of my faith life unfolding in queer spaces. Not knowing what to do, I excused myself

from the meeting to take a call, and in the end, I said nothing. I'm still not sure if the #Failure in that situation was mine because I said nothing, or the fact that in the UCC the congregations are the employers their pastors. I wasn't ready to lose my job. Perhaps I can just blame capitalism.

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

In any case, I do love the church. I am in love with the vision of church from Act 2:44-47.

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" Throw in "and all were willing to reflect on and learn from their mistakes," and that is a still life of the church I yearn for. But churches are people, and people don't always want to reflect. I have enough experience of congregations saying they want to do racial justice work, but then when that work requires self-reflection, understanding our own sociocultural location, understanding how we are complicit and benefit from systems of white supremacy, people drop out of the classes, or say it's political, or they can't understand why we're not talking about the issues. Well, one of the issues is that we don't want be wrong, or do or say the wrong thing, or acknowledge that we have privilege when we do, or understand and accept that because of our privilege, just our very presence, in certain contexts, may cause uneasiness for some. We have to learn to be okay with that. If we can learn to be okay with that, then maybe, just maybe, we will do or say the wrong thing less often. Because shorthand for all that is humility. And with humility, we can fail much more gracefully. Amen

My call to action this week is to give to organizations that support transgender people. I've got some links in the resource section of the transcript for the Trevor Project, The Black Trans Advocacy Coalition and a couple other organizations. And for those of you are church folks, there is a Trans Action Day hosted by the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. It is an online event on May 20 with speakers, panels and a worship service. I will put all the information for that in the transcript.

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 Rev. Liz Kearny.

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

The Trevor Project

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

Black Tran Advocacy Coalition

<https://blacktrans.org/>

Black Trans Travel Fund

<https://www.blacktranstravelfund.com/>

Why This Action Day?

As we have seen in Loomis and across the country, queer and trans folks are experiencing hate-filled violence, discrimination and legislative attacks at unprecedented levels. As a Conference, we are calling each other to respond by joining together for a conference-wide convening to build our capacity for solidarity and action in support of our queer and trans kin. Our QT Solidarity Action Day will include worship celebrations, a State-of-the-Movement plenary, workshops on political advocacy, community safety and rural organizing, and tools for expanding your church’s welcome. In order to provide the greatest amount of access across the NCNC, all sessions will take place on Zoom.

2-minute shareable video about the Action Day: <https://youtu.be/lwQcGeS-xtc>

Register

Here: https://ncncucc.my.salesforce-sites.com/default/CnP_PaaS_EVT_ExternalRegistrationPage?event_id=a2CEZ00000007uG2AQ

Panelist & Speaker Line-up

Panel: Deepening Belonging and Expanding Hospitality for Trans and Nonbinary Folks in Our Churches

- Rev. Rhina Ramos, National Coordinator for Encuentros Latinx, UCC National, Pastor of Ministerio Latino in Oakland, CA.
- Austen Harke, author of [Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians](#) founder and director of [Transmission Ministry Collective](#)

Workshop: Advocating against Anti-Trans Legislation Locally to Nationally

- Katie Adams, Policy Advocate for Domestic Issues, UCC Office of Public Policy and Advocacy in Washington DC
- Jessica Quinn, Online Communications Specialist, UCC Office of Public Policy and Advocacy in Washington DC

Workshop: Building Capacity for Community Safety in Violent Times

- Brigitta Vieyra and Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) Faith Partners

Workshop: Queer and Trans Affirming Organizing in Rural Communities

- Yadi Martínez-Reyna, Founder of Color Splash Out, Associate Pastor at New Church, UCC in Texas, Pastor at 1st UCC in Second Life

REFERENCES:

<https://19thnews.org/2023/04/missouri-transgender-health-care-rule-attorney-general/#:~:text=The%20order%20requires%20transgender%20patients,before%20seeking%20gender%2Daffirming%20care.>

<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/01/1173079450/montana-rep-zooey-zephyr-sues-over-her-removal-from-house-floor>

<https://onbeing.org/programs/adrienne-maree-brown-we-are-in-a-time-of-new-suns/#transcript>

<https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/with-floridas-trans-bathroom-ban>

<https://www.governing.com/context/white-american-church-find-way-from-segregationist-past-diverse-future>

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