

Podcast Transcript

November 7, 2021

Proper 27; 24th Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture: Hebrews 9:24-28

Once and Never Again

<<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 at my home, which is on the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Ohlone people in what is now known as Oakland, California.

As many of you know, this podcast 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 wherever it shows up, including in our own Christian tradition. And from there, we are seeking to follow the leadership of people of color as we build up a new, more joyful, more just world.

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

Today I’m thinking about how multifaceted and insidious white supremacy is, how it has sunk its roots so deeply into the ground we stand on and sent its runners so far and wide that it has

begun to look just like ground cover, like something natural and unremarkable until you notice the toxic fruit it is bearing.

My housemate, the Rev. Jean Jeffress, whom many of you know from this very podcast, has often said that she was taught, growing up, that “Racism is bad. Don’t do it.” That’s what I was taught, too, as if racism were a discrete set of individual practices and prejudices that could be deftly avoided or left behind like clothing that has gone out of fashion, rather than like the air we breathe every day, and the lenses through which we see the world, and the ways we’ve been taught to think.

I’m grateful for this podcast as one of the places where we can try to name the more insidious aspects of white supremacy and maybe through that naming, get just a little bit of distance between us and it so that we can make better decisions, begin to untangle the tendrils, and maybe get a little more free.

Today, specifically, I want to talk about divisiveness, about scapegoating, about atonement, and about the logic of the carceral state and how it penetrates even our intimate lives. We’ll do that by looking at the book of Hebrews from which one of the lectionary texts is drawn. Let’s turn there now.

<<timestamp 3:29>>

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

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

Before we get into the specifics of Hebrews I want to give a little context. Various contributors to this podcast have said, over the years, that Rome is the unnamed central character in much of the New Testament, and that is true for Hebrews as well.

No one knows exactly who wrote the extended sermon that is passed down to us as the book of Hebrews, or even exactly when it was written, but it IS clear that it was penned during a time when followers of the Way of Jesus, along with other Jews (because the movement was mostly Jewish at that time) were being persecuted by the Roman empire—a very scary time. The text MAY have been written shortly after the destruction of the temple by the Roman military in 70 AD, an intensely traumatic event for Jewish freedom fighters. The place where people felt they could draw closest to God had been destroyed.

If you want to weaken a people’s resistance and revolutionary fire, attack their means of connecting to what they hold most sacred.

In our own context, I think about efforts in various cities to impose curfews when things are really lit up—for example, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder last summer. They tried to forbid us to gather, to come together with the people we were fighting for and with. They tried to take away what we held sacred. But even in the midst of a global pandemic that made it dangerous for us to be in close proximity we have found ways to stay connected. We have held together, and we are continuing to struggle for our people, but it has not been easy.

I emphasize all of this context because the book of Hebrews is DANGEROUS in the hands of contemporary Christians who lack this context. Because it compares Jesus to the Jewish high priests and describes a “new covenant” that ostensibly supersedes the covenant made with Abraham and his descendants, it gets read as an argument for Christian supremacy and even the replacement of Judaism by Christianity, which in fancy theological language they call supersessionism. This is toxic and frankly terrifying theology that has been used to fuel antisemitism for centuries. It is also anachronistic. There was no Christianity, so to speak, at that time. There were only various approaches to being Jewish, with some Gentiles newly being invited in through the Way, which was a particular sect of Judaism. We have to remember, in approaching this text, that it was written for a Jewish audience, most likely by a Jewish writer talking to their own people and trying to encourage them in the face of intense repression.

What often happens in the face of a repressive regime is that subgroups of those facing repression are pitted against one another. This may have been happening at the time Hebrews was written, with the followers of Jesus facing particularly intense persecution from Rome and Rome’s lackeys within Judea. The writer of Hebrews seems to be encouraging followers of Jesus’ way to persevere and not fall away, despite pressure to do so. The problem might LOOK like conflict between followers of Jesus and other Jews, but the real problem was Roman repression.

When we don’t name the larger repressive forces at work, those subject to them are pitted against each other. In our context, that means poor white people are pitted against poor BIPOC people. Working class citizens of the United States are pitted against immigrants. Heterosexual people are led to believe that same-sex unions are threatening their marriages because they can’t name the ways that heteropatriarchy disfigures mutual love. A friend and I have been talking recently about bi-phobia within queer community: The problem is not people who are bisexual and in relationships that carry straight privilege, but the (patriarchy-serving) heteronormativity that confers that privilege. Likewise, antisemitism blames Jewish people for economic inequality and serves to distract from the larger economic systems that actually generate that inequality.

I am a part of several communities right now that are being torn apart by what looks like interpersonal conflict, but what turns out to be the pressures put on multiracial formations by white supremacy, and in many cases also heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and an oligarchical governing and economic system. We have to start naming the unnamed central characters in our dramas if we have any hope of staying together to dream of their demise.

These larger systems are the source of so much suffering. Just recently, I paid a visit to my parents in Ohio, and I was so struck by how even our intimate familial relationships have been impacted by these systems—the ways that patriarchy has made it almost impossible for my father to express his feelings, the ways that fat phobia, itself a tool of white supremacy, has caused my mother to hate her body and pass that hate along to me, which has had huge repercussions for our relationship. Indigenous theorist Kim Tallbear has written about how the nuclear family was engineered in order to serve colonization by providing patriarchal units that could be granted parcels of stolen indigenous land. This same nuclear family structure has been, frankly, disastrous for many of us—especially queer folks and survivors of childhood abuse. There are larger actors at work in our suffering, and we need to name them.

This is the backdrop for looking at this week’s lectionary passage from Hebrews. We’ll turn there next.

<<timestamp 10:03>>

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

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

This is Hebrews 9, verses 24-28:

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. 25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. 26 Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, 28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

In order to understand this passage, it is helpful to know a bit about how atonement, or the forgiveness of sins, was handled in ancient Israel. According to Leviticus 16, on the yearly day

of atonement, the high priest was to offer a bull as sacrifice for his own sins and those of his household and then a goat as sacrifice for the sins of the people. A second goat would be allowed to live but would be sent out away from the community and into the wilderness bearing the sins of the community. This second goat is the origin of our concept of the *scapegoat*—the one who is blamed for whatever is wrong in the community and then is cast out, excluded from community ostensibly for the well-being of that community.

In Hebrews and in numerous other places in scripture, Jesus is imagined as a kind of scapegoat, the sole sacrifice for the sins of the people, given to God once and for all time—the last act of atonement that would be needed.

A lot of us progressive and radical Christians are skeptical of atonement theology. We dismiss it as sort of primitive and brutal. The whole idea of animal sacrifice is anathema to many of us, much less the idea that Jesus had to be sacrificed for our sins. There are some good reasons for this skepticism. I'm not all that keen, either, on the notion of a father God who would demand the death of his son in order to appease his anger. It sounds too much like sanctifying abuse.

But today I am thinking that our skepticism of atonement as a concept does not mean we don't practice it. Who bears the weight of our collective sins today? If we consider that this society sets us up to participate in theft (by extracting money from the poorest people and redistributing it to the rest of us) and murder (by financing the military war machine and police departments that preserve an unjust order domestically), on whose heads are those sins placed? Who is sent out from among us, excluded from community, in order to atone for them? We may say that we object to the practice of sacrifice, but if so, what are we doing to end it?

In the systems we have created, Jesus is being “made to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world.” This happens at the macrocosm, for example, as poorer nations populated mostly by people of color face the most imminent danger from climate catastrophe, and as poor communities of color are overpoliced and disproportionately incarcerated. It happens in the microcosm, as many of us—especially those of us who have been targeted for oppression in some way (femmes, queer people, people of color, people with disabilities) try to atone for some vague, unspecified sense of wrongness by working too hard, abusing our bodies, saying yes to things we don't want to do, all in an attempt to make up for something that we sense is lacking in ourselves. This is atonement. And Jesus is being “made to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world” inside us and in those we share this earth with.

Another way that atonement sacrifice shows up is in communities—from families to faith communities to movement organizations—where one person gets identified as The Problem (capital T capital P) that is ruining the community for everyone. Often this person is an outlier in

some way—recently I’ve seen it happen a couple times with neurodivergent folks who are behaving in ways that challenge implicit group norms. Theologian Rene Girard has written extensively about this scapegoating dynamic through which the tensions in any group are projected onto a single person who is then expelled from that group. This process does have the temporary effect of resolving tension, but before long, tension will begin to rise again, and another scapegoat will be found.

One way to understand this passage from Hebrews is that the crucifixion of Jesus should be the last scapegoating sacrifice, like, EVER.

According to stories I have heard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer picked up on this meaning of the passage by placing the word *once*, from verse 26, on the altar at his Underground Seminary, as an indictment of the practice of human sacrifice of Jews and others as practiced by the Nazis and a call to resistance on the part of those who claimed to follow Christ. We might do well to place this word on our own altars. The Holocaust happened once. May it never happen again, to anyone. Jesus was crucified. May the crucifixions end now.

Once And For All.

<<Timestamp: 16:57>>

<<Music interlude, verse 3 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

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

(Call to Action and Outro)

As we close out today, I invite you to think about the communities of which you are a part. How have you seen scapegoating play out there? Who has been identified as the problem, and how are they challenging the implicit norms of the group. Are there changes your community is being called to make in response? What are the OTHER tensions that this person is distracting from, and how are those related to larger, often unnamed actors such as white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism? What might happen if you began to name those actors and explore their effects on your relationships, norms, policies, and practices?

I also invite you to consider whether you are doing things, maybe even harming yourself in some way, in an effort to atone for something you have been taught is lacking in you. What would it mean to believe—really believe—that Christ took on that work once and for all?

The opposite of scapegoating is accountability—taking centered, grounded responsibility for our actions and words in the world. There is a great somatically based course available online called

Centered Accountability. I'll link to that and some other accountability resources in the transcript.

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 interact with us on our Facebook page—look for SURJ Faith—and at our podcast page on Soundcloud. Search for “The Word Is Resistance.” We appreciate your feedback very much and are especially eager to hear from BIPOC folks and people who are not Christian: How are we doing? What's working, and what's not? We'd love you input.

And don't forget to tune in next week to hear a resistance word from Rev. Anne Dunlap, and, I believe, a special guest that I'll let her introduce you to.

Finally, we want to thank our sound editor for this week, Max Pearl. Max, so much love and gratitude to you, always!

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: 19:49>>

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

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

RESOURCES

Find the Accountability Mapping course here: <https://accountabilitymapping.thinkific.com>

There are a couple great short videos on accountability here:

<https://bcw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-accountability-2/>

<https://bcw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-accountability/>

<https://bcw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-self-accountability/>

<https://bcw.barnard.edu/videos/how-shame-can-block-accountability/>

You can find a toolkit and video series here:

<https://project-nia.org/building-accountable-communities-toolkit>

And here's the brilliant national gathering on Building Accountable Communities:

<https://www.facebook.com/BCRW.Feminism/videos/1035701983283041/>

SURJ-Faith is excited and proud to launch the “Community Safety for All Congregational Action Toolkit” for white faith/spiritual leaders and congregations across traditions. The toolkit offers extensive resources to support white faith/spiritual communities and institutions **ready to take action to stop relying on police and build alternatives instead.** The toolkit includes a 4-Movement model we've developed to support congregations in moving to action, including assessment tools, political education suggestions, action ideas for a variety of scenarios, theological reflection, alternatives congregations can utilize, and support options from SURJ-Faith. [You can get the toolkit here](#)

REFERENCES

Girard, René. *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Tallbear, Kim. “Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family” in *Making Kin Not Population*. Prickly Paradigm #56. Adele Clark and Donna Haraway, eds. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018.

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