

Podcast Transcript

July 30, 2023 Pentecost 9A

Genesis 29:15-28 and Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128 • 1 Kings 3:5-12 and Psalm 119:129-136 • **Romans 8:26-39** • Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

<<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:]

Greetings beloveds from the heart of summer in the Northern Hemisphere. And welcome to the Word is Resistance, a weekly podcast hosted by Showing Up for Racial Justice. In this podcast, we explore the readings from the Christian bible assigned for the week in the Revised Common Lectionary, focusing on how they are providing us tools to resist white supremacy’s culture of domination, exploitation, and oppression and how these texts can inspire new decolonial, antiracist, and liberatory visions and practices to build a new world. You can probably hear some traffic noise coming through my open windows on this vibrant and warm day.

I’m Dr. Sharon Fennema and I serve as the Curator of Join the Movement toward Racial Justice, an antiracism initiative of the United Church of Christ. I use she and her pronouns and am recording this podcast from my home which rests on the unceded and ancestral lands of the Ohlone people, who continue to lay down prayers and raise up life on this ground, in what is now known by some as Oakland California.

I’m honored to contribute to this podcast which is geared toward white Christians like me who are searching for ways to resource and expand our capacity for racial justice. As Christians of European descent, we know we have particular work to do in resisting the logics of supremacy, which we benefit from and are implicated in, so that we might contribute to new futures shaped by the liberatory visions and flourishing of Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

The 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.

[Transition:]

This week, I’m grateful to contribute to our series of wrestlings with Romans. I’m so grateful for my co-contributors who have already been doing some beautiful and liberatory work with

these passages we'd often rather ignore. I'm inspired by them to dig into our passage from Romans for this week, and I hope you are too!

So I invite us to prepare for our wrestlings with this blessing by Jan Richardson.

If this blessing were easy, anyone could claim it.
As it is, I am here to tell you that it will take some work.
This is the blessing that visits you
in the struggling,
in the wrestling,
in the striving.
This is the blessing that comes after you have left everything behind,
after you have stepped out,
after you have crossed into that realm beyond every landmark you have known.
This is the blessing that takes all night to find.
It's not that this blessing is so difficult,
as if it were not filled with grace or with the love that lives in every line.
It's simply that it requires you to want it,
to ask for it,
to place yourself in its path.
It demands that you [rise] to meet it when it arrives,
that you stretch yourself in ways you didn't know you could move,
that you agree to not give up.
So when this blessing comes,
borne in the hands of the difficult angel who has chosen you,
do not let go.
Give yourself into its grip.
It will wound you,
but I tell you there will come a day when what felt to you like limping
was something more like dancing
as you moved into the cadence of your new and blessed name.

[Main Content:]

Now let us hop back onto the wrestling mat with Paul and see what these words from Romans, chapter 8, verses 26-39 have for us today.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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

I have to tell you, I’ve been sitting with this passage from Romans for over a month now and still feel like I’m swirling in unending cycles of misunderstanding and unending layers of misinterpretation. I feel like I keep reading this passage and thinking about what word of resistance it might be offering white Christians and then saying to myself, but, wait, remember Sharon, Paul is Jewish. Or hold on, that interpretation doesn’t make sense if Paul is writing to the privileged, that is, Roman citizens. Or, now, that can’t be right if Paul is writing to Romans against Roman imperialism. I go back and read books and articles. I listen to what my amazing colleagues have done with Romans so far in this series and in past podcasts. And I start to think that I have a handle on it and then I return to the text and think, no that still can’t be it if Paul is upending the logics of Roman imperial theology.

Start. Stop. Start. Stop.

Idea! – Reminder – Course correction – Begin again.

Insight – Mistake – Calling in – Revision.

Swirling, swirling, swirling.

Now I’m going to admit to you that I chose this week to contribute to the podcast because this week’s reading from Romans has some of my favorite bible verses of all time in it and I thought

they would be easier to interpret than what some of my co-contributors have had to deal with. I mean, no flesh and spirit binaries here. No law and sins. No troubling slavery or marriage metaphors. Just a Spirit that prays for us, a God who is on our side, and a love that we can't be separated from by anything. Pretty good stuff I'd say. Well, suffice to say, all the things I've been reading and dwelling with leave me swirling with the truth that it's more complicated than the ways I've been taught to use and understand these passages.

Start. Stop. Start. Stop.

Idea! – Reminder – Course correction – Begin again.

Insight – Mistake – Calling in – More research – Revision.

Swirling, swirling, swirling.

And so here I am, the day before my submission deadline, still trying to figure out what, if anything, I have to contribute to our understanding and interpretation of this text for dismantling white supremacy and building a more racially just world. And finally, it dawns on me: this swirling is exactly the point. All these starts and stops, these mistakes, these course corrections – this is what it takes to unravel ourselves from the logics of empire. And this fitful work is what Paul is trying to encourage his comrades to undertake, to disentangle themselves from long histories and practices of Roman imperialism. The work to decolonize our imaginations, to disrupt dominant ideologies and histories, to discover collective liberation anew and our roles in it – all of this happens in starts and stops - swirling, swirling, swirling.

So I invite you to join me in the swirling, the starts and stops of wondering what this passage might have for us today to decolonize our imaginations. What then are we to say about these things, indeed?

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

<< *"Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long."* >>

As I focus in on the last section of this pericope, beginning with Verse 31, I find myself asking, if Paul is writing to the Roman equivalent of us, relatively privileged white Christians who are trying to live in deep solidarity and learn new liberatory ways of being in the world, what does it mean for God to be for *us*? How do we make sense of the idea that God is on our side, when, for the most part, the world is already set up to believe and assume that? Just as the Roman empire was structured to privilege these Romans, so the racialized systems of our society are set up for our success. All of our systems and structures already reinforce that God is for us. If Paul is writing to Romans against Roman imperialism, surely he can't be saying God is on the side of Roman domination and oppression, right? If we as white Christians were to take this idea that God is for us at face value, we would be making the same mistake that those who call affirmative action discriminatory are making: we would be failing to see that our society, including college admissions, is already set up to privilege us, already knows and declares that God and all that is

good and powerful and prosperous is for us. But that's not the God either we or Paul knows in Jesus Christ. So, what then are we to say about these things? Swirling, swirling, swirling.

I wonder actually, if Paul is working in this whole chapter to reinforce for his comrades a wholly different understanding of who "us" is. He sets out at the beginning of the chapter to help his comrades distinguish between those who live by the flesh, aka, those who live in alignment with Roman imperial values, and those who live by the Spirit, aka those who live in alignment with God's liberatory love. "You are in the Spirit" he says, as if to remind these Roman comrades that they are continually called to decolonize their living away from Rome and toward the lineages of liberatory resistance embodied by their Jewish and enslaved comrades.

Then Paul describes the ways in which God's presence and blessing accompanies the so-called weak and suffering, again I think, cuing his comrades to pay attention to the radical word that salvation comes not from Rome, but abides in the generations of Jewish and enslaved freedom fighters. In the end, he even uses all those good Roman imperial words – predestined, called, justified, glorified – and turns them on their head because they refer not to the Roman empire or Caesar, but to those who are "conformed to the image of [Jesus Christ]."

And then we get to this culmination – if God is for us, who is against us? Us who follow the pathways of the Jesus who died in solidarity. Us who are accounted as sheep to the slaughter. Us who suffer poverty, who are condemned, afflicted, persecuted, tortured, murdered. When Paul says "us" in this context, I think he is holding out a vision for his Roman comrades of what it means to truly be in solidarity, to truly hold as central the experiences of their marginalized and oppressed comrades, to truly divest from their privilege and invest in collective liberation. By saying God is for us, Paul is reminding his Romans comrades which side they are on, the side of collective liberation. Perhaps this is Paul's version of the wisdom and challenge that Black feminists have been offering for decades – when black women are free, we all will be free. Paul's version might say when your Jewish and enslaved comrades are free, you Romans will also be free. Then in all things, we, all of us, will be victorious through the one who loved us.

All of this swirling around, all of these starts and stops have left me continuing to return and return to this passage and listen for the places where I need to be reminded, corrected, called in and revise my understanding. To keep myself in the swirling, in the starts and stops of decolonizing my imagination, I tried rewriting my favorite verses at the end of this chapter, with some of these new insights in mind. Here's my humble wresting with Romans:

For I am convinced that neither white supremacy nor racial advantage
Neither imaginations constrained by empire nor the limits of segregated lives
Neither white savior practices nor boot-strap theologies
Neither racialized capitalism's extractive economies nor discriminatory generational wealth
Neither false and unearned privileges nor our ignorance of them

Will be able to separate us from each other
Will be able to separate us from lineages of liberation
Will be able to separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus,
the true Sovereign who reigns in the glory of the power
that is revolutionary collective freedom
[because I will work to come correct].

<< *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:]

For our call to action this week, I want to invite you to pay attention to how you encounter the word “us” both in written and aural words. Who do you imagine when you read or hear it? Who is actually the “us” being referenced? Who is included, excluded, presumed? Is “us” just a substitute for dominant or normalized? When is “us” an erasure? When is “us” collective liberation? How do you know the difference? What does it take for you to decolonize your imagination and re-envision who “us” is?

And I invite you to visit or revisit the amazing black feminist wisdom and challenge of the Combahee River Collective Statement from 1977. Take a moment to pay attention to the complex ways the authors are forming us-ness and we-ness and what that means for their vision of collective liberation. How can you participate in this formation of “us?”

[Outro:]

Thanks as always for joining us. We’d love to hear from you all 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. And finally, a huge thanks to our sound editor, Claire Hitchins!

[Words of blessing/encouragement:]

I close out today with the New Revised Sharon’s Version of Romans 8:38-39 as a closing prayer and blessing.

For I am convinced that neither white supremacy nor racial advantage
Neither imaginations constrained by empire nor the limits of segregated lives
Neither white savior practices nor boot-strap theologies

Neither racialized capitalism's extractive economies nor discriminatory generational wealth
Neither false and unearned privileges nor our ignorance of them
Will be able to separate us from each other
Will be able to separate us from lineages of liberation
Will be able to separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus,
the true Sovereign who reigns in the glory of the power
that is revolutionary collective freedom.

May it be so.

<<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:

- Check out the [Combahee River Collective Statement](#)
- Take some time with Ibram Kendi's [great analysis of the Affirmative Action decision from the supreme court](#) and whose truths it centers.
- To explore more contours of collective liberation, check out Chapter 2 in Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samaransinha's book *The Future is Disabled*: "[Interdependence Is Not Some Giant Living in the Hillside Coming Down to Visit the Townspeople: The Church of Show the Fuck Up, in Real Life](#)"

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REFERENCES:

- Jan Richardson, [The Wrestling is Where the Blessing Begins](#)

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