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Podcast Transcript

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- [Genesis 21:8-21](#) and [Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17](#) •
- [Jeremiah 20:7-13](#) and [Psalm 69:7-10, \(11-15\), 16-18](#) •
- [Romans 6:1b-11](#) •
- [Matthew 10:24-39](#)

[MUSIC: "Building Up a New World"]

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: Hello, everyone, and 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, Colorado 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 the podcast.

I'm Reverend Jean Jeffress. I am an ordained minister in the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. That is a long, long title. Basically, I am a pastor in Northern California and I live in Oakland, which exists on the ancestral and unceded land of the Ohlone People.

And I am here today with -

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: Hi, everyone. I am Nichola Torbett. I use she and her pronouns and it's great to be here with you. I am a lot of things, a gospel preacher, a podcaster, a writer. I do a lot of pulpit supply in the Northern California Nevada

Conference so I've seen some of you. I'm also a pet sitter and most recently, I've accepted a position as Associate Director of Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center in Eastern Pennsylvania on Lenape land.

But for now, we are here on Ohlone land. We're currently in Palo Alto, California, and welcome, everyone.

This podcast, as many of you know, 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 ourselves and our own Christian tradition. We are trying to defect from systems, structures, ideologies, and habitual ways of being that uphold supremacy of all kinds. We are building up a new world.

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: The Word is Resistance is a lectionary based podcast that approaches each week, approaches the lectionary with - through an anti-racist, anti-oppression lens. For those of you who don't know about it, it is meant to be a source for preaching each week, to offer a new perspective, and you can find it at SURJ.org, Showing Up for Racial Justice dot org. The podcast lives on SoundCloud. But the thing about it that makes it special are that the contributors to this podcast are not necessarily people you're going to hear from all the time. We're just - most of us are - some of us are ordained ministers. Some of us are just - are ministers in the community or thinkers, theologians, preachers. And we're just trying to defect from this whiteness thing that has deformed our humanity in such a way to make us, you know, to make Christianity a tool of white supremacy.

So, this is a podcast for anyone who is looking for some scholarship around this, some tools, some ideas, and some solidarity in this work. This podcast also does series, so if you go onto the - if you find the podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, you can find some cool series. Last summer there was a whole series on disability justice. It was great. I wasn't contributing at that time and so I had to go and binge the whole thing and I was completely blown away by the scholarship and the work. It's totally worth going and binging it.

We did a whole season of contesting antisemitism in the Gospel of John during Eastertide. That was a great series.

The most recent one that we did was called #FailureLab, where the contributors were basically trying to identify the ways in which we have failed in our anti-oppression work, just naming the time that we were the white person in the Black Lives Matter meeting where we cried a big bowl of white lady tears for some reason, like just all of those things that we do.

And to ease up pressure on white folks who are trying to do this work and trying to desperately get it right, and that's the thing about us progressive folks is we just want to get it right and we're afraid to make a mistake and to say that we made a mistake. And we're going to make mistakes all the time. So, that's what that series is about.

This series that we're in now is #WrestlingWithRomans. Romans, like many of Paul's letters, has been interpreted in ways that have been weaponized to condemn so many different things, to - to support a Christian supremacy, to support a lot of sexism, and just a lot of problems with Paul in general and Romans. Misinterpretations, lazy theology, not caring that it was written in another language and taking a minute just to think about - just to even think about that and what might be lost in translation.

And so, this podcast is addressing those things and there are, so far, the two podcasts that have come out in this series have been amazing. And then Reverend Anne Dunlap, who is the coordinator, the SURJ Faith Coordinator who coordinates and curates this podcast, did an episode in 2017 that did kind of an overarching outlook on the whole Book of Romans that was really good. And it was called Romans and the Wages of Whiteness or something like that, right? Yeah. It was really good.

So, this podcast brings a different approach. You're going to have people who are looking at different sources, who are looking at different theologians, who, you know, not just Tillich and Barth and all the guys, but looking at women and womanist theologies, looking at disability theology, looking at queer theology, and looking at ways so that we can approach the Bible as a tool for our liberation and the liberation of others and not a club to beat people over the head with.

This - being able to participate in this podcast has given me a lot of leeway to basically preach things that I maybe

couldn't say from the pulpit - not even maybe, for sure couldn't say from the pulpit because, you know, fragility would cause shattering of heads all over sanctuaries.

But so, it's been very - it's been good for my scholarship. It's stretched me in that way. So, if you haven't delved into this podcast, I recommend giving it a try. Do you want to add anything, Nichola?

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: I second that. I mean, it's been really amazing for me to work on this podcast. It has deepened my own anti-racist praxis a lot. The first time I had to record an episode of this podcast, I don't know if this happened to you, but I was terrified. As a white person trying to talk about racism and having it recorded, you know, to be put out for the world, was really scary.

So, it's been such an amazing practice and some of the things that I have learned through doing this is to always look at a text and try to see where would I be in this text? And usually, I would not be Jesus. Shockingly. Often, I would be a Roman, right? Maybe even a Roman centurion. Maybe just sort of artisan or small businessperson, but kind of aligned with Rome, you know. And so, thinking about what it means to be a white person positioned as I am in this culture and what it would have meant at that time has been really fascinating.

Some other things I wanted to mention about just like how I approach a text with this lens is to - to look at the kinds of things that we might be missing as citizens of modern day Rome, you know, things like what is this text saying about ancestor practice, for example, that has been completely severed for white Christians? We don't have that practice. It's not alive in our culture. So, there's something that we're missing often in the biblical text that is about ancestry. And that comes up in Romans when we talk about being in the lineage of Abraham, right? We don't have a way of understanding that.

Things like how time functions, you know, is different in the story world of Jesus than it is in our culture. Ways that American individuality messes up our understanding of scripture, that we forget that every you in the Bible is plural, right? We're not talking about individual piety. We're talking about a culture. And that's going to be really important as we get into Romans.

[MUSIC: "Building Up a New World"]

All right. We're going to read the scripture which this week is Romans 6:1b to 11.

"Should we continue in sin, in order that grace may abound, by now means how can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we have been buried with Him by baptism into death so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.

We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over Him. The death He died, He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives, He lives to God.

So, you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Okay, Paul. I love it. In the first episode in this series, Reverend Anne talks about the fact that Paul is actually dictating his letters, which is helpful in trying to decode like why does this seem to be so meandering and winding and back and forth. And I have this image of Paul sort of pacing around and also like - like, running his hand over his head and sweating a little bit, you know, writing this very fervent letter, that sometimes when we read it so many years in the future, it's like, what, Paul? What are you so excited about? You know?

But one of the things that has been really helpful for me in thinking about Romans and really kind of transformed how I think about that letter is that sin, for Paul, is not so much about individual bad behavior. He's talking about something that is a principality or power, basically, that we are bound to, that having been immersed in Roman culture for Paul or American whiteness for many of us who are white, we are just swimming in it and it has gotten inside us and we are living it out and it is sin.

So, should we continue in sin, in order that grace may abound, by no means, right? Something has happened. Something has interrupted the ways in which whiteness has taken us over. And so, I am curious about that, Jean, if you have any thoughts on like what has interrupted that? What is this passage saying to you?

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: I think that the idea that Paul's whole - whole thing is that Jesus coming and then dying, that's the game changer, and while he's not - he's not talking about that in and above Judaism. Jesus died so that therefore Judaism, we can chuck it out.

He has this wild idea, and it is wild, and anachronistically, it sounds very Christian, but his wild idea is that in Christ, there is this unity that exists, that people are going to come together in this - in this death and rising again, this game changing event that's occurred, and that gentiles who are coming to the movement don't have to become Jewish, that Jewish people who are following Jesus don't have to not be Jewish, that there's this confluence, and it's - that's the interruption.

And so, if we're going to think about it today, the interruption is Jesus - is this love, this insane unity that seems unworldly, unlikely, like very unlikely and a very unlikely event that would unify. So, I think when Paul is talking about sin, he's talking about - he's talking about this thing that has taken us, that, like you said, that we - how did you word it? That we are enslaved to it. And he is saying that there's this - that Jesus somehow wiggles His way between us and that in this unity that is so incredibly unlikely and unseats it in a way. And then asks us to be obedient to this way of life that he unfolds in his letters and that we can learn about from the work that Paul did.

So, another thing Reverend Anne Dunlap said in her podcast about Romans from 2017 was if you replace sin with whiteness, it works really well, or white supremacy, it works really well.

So, the unlikely interruption of Jesus and of love, of - you know, of God's - pouring God's life out into the world in this enfleshed way, you know, and then walking among us, like, that's the interruption. And so, I don't know what we'd do with that now, with the really secular world, except to call it, you know, some kind of really unlikely love to which we are bound to. That's - that's the best I have on that.

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: Yeah. There's a way that somehow we have - if we really accept Jesus, if we are baptized into His death, as he says, which is this very intense thing, right? To be baptized into someone's death. It's a death of an old self and a taking on of a new self, right, that somehow the self that was bound to white supremacy, that had been soaked through with that and could not help but live it out in the world, has died, and a new self is there.

And I am so intrigued by - every time I find baptism in scripture, ever since I - I did a study of the rite of baptism in different denominations and there's this part in many denominations where the candidate for baptism is asked, do you renounce Satan and all his wiles, you know? It's this very dramatic language. But I think if ever there were a wile of Satan, white supremacy is that.

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: Very wily.

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: Very wily. You know? Do you renounce white supremacy? I mean, it reminds me of, during the big evangelical explosion that happened in the mid-1800's in this country, Charles Finney would baptize people. He would bring - he would do an altar call. He would bring people forward. Do you accept Jesus as your lord and savior?

But the thing that often doesn't get explained is that then he would take the people who said yes back behind the stage and say okay, then sign the abolitionist rolls. And if they said no, he would say, come back tomorrow night because you don't understand what you just signed up for, you know?

And I just wonder if the people who are getting baptized in our congregations really know what they're signing up for. Like, really? It's very powerful.

I'm really intrigued by the stuff in here about death no longer having dominion over Jesus. And it kind of got me thinking about, well, what has dominion over us in the US? You know? I'm not in immediate danger of death but niceness, being agreeable, being polite, I think those things often have dominion over me. Comfort. My own comfort. Does that have dominion over me? Fear of other peoples' opinions of me may have dominion. And so, to say those things no longer have dominion over me because I am choosing to devote myself to Jesus is a

really - a really interesting thing, you know, and something that I think we have to choose like moment by moment, right?

To be able to disrupt, to be like feral, you know, to be willing to offend other white people is I think part of the promise here. It's like if death - if the fear of death is taken away, then the fear of peoples' bad opinions must surely be taken away, right?

So, I don't know. That was a lot. What else?

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: So, there's the idea of renouncing white supremacy and then there's - or any of these things, heteronormativity or capitalism or any of these things that are just like basically the ocean and not the shark. So, there's the idea of denouncing it and trying to live that out and then the reality, the day to day reality of what Paul's talking about, the powers of principalities or the things that have us, like, still having us.

Like, we are still had. I am still had by them and it's a daily, minutely thinking and rethinking and extrication of thoughts and thinking and cop outs and just everything. It's an uphill. It's an upstream for sure. And so, these ways of looking at the text, you know, it's like an upstream - a hermeneutic of upstream, in a way, you know, just looking for - looking for the liberative message or looking for who didn't get to say - whose story was told for them? Who didn't get to say, you know, what are they really talking about? Is there a subversive message?

Like, we were hearing today in another episode of this Wrestling with Romans, that this whole justification, this idea of justification that's, you know, Luther's big why he loved Paul so much and not James because justification by faith. And what we learn from Reverend Anne Dunlap is that justification was the language of Rome, like used to justify their violence on people. And so, Paul was co-opting that language to say no, we're justified by God. You know? And so, what does that do to the message?

So, like looking for those messages and then trying to like look for them, the way to live into that in our lives. It's, you know, it's a whole thing. That's my modern parlance. That means it's hard when I say it's a whole thing. It's a life to live. So, that's - I mean, I think that looking for these kinds of things in Paul's letters, and remembering too that Paul was writing letters, so we're reading someone else's mail and we

don't know what they said in return and Paul was not trying to write scripture or doctrine. Paul was writing to communities with specific conflicts, addressing things very specifically, and Paul was not an apologist for the Roman empire. He was trying to save communities and turn people toward Christ because he really believed, first of all, that Christ was coming back any day, it was happening any day, but that there was this, like I said, this unlikely, radical, crazy unity in Jesus that would bring together all the factions.

And so, Paul was wild. Paul is very irritating. I'm not trying to take that away. But he was wild.

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: Yeah, and I think Reverend Anne in her first episode started off by saying, you know, we don't ever want to apologize for or downplay the harm that has been done by the way that Paul's letters have been appropriated by empire and used against human beings, you know.

As a queer person, like, whenever I read the word sin, even though I have this analysis, I know, but the minute I hear sin, I'm like, uh-oh. You know? It's about to - and so, it's really helpful to me to remember, no, that's not actually what Paul is talking about. He's talking about something systemic, something that is much larger than, you know, who's in your bed at night. It's like, how do you - how have you taken on the values and the violence and the domination and the social climbing and the honor seeking and the reputation obsession of Rome? You know? And how are you living that out day to day? And you know, the fact that being baptized into Christ, we can be liberated from all of that. And I agree with you. It's like minute to minute. It's something that we have to choose over and over again. Are we swearing allegiance to the status quo of white supremacy or are we swearing allegiance to Jesus?

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: Yeah, and in Rome, it was illegal to do it, and it's not illegal here, supposedly, in America, but I think that if we're swearing allegiance to the God that Paul is talking about, you know, we're really, we're going against - we're going to run up against the status quo pretty quickly. And we're going to run up against, you know, niceness and white respectability and all the, you know, all of that. We're going to run up against it really quickly.

And I just always remember when I first - the first big protest I went to for Black Lives Matter and going there and being all fired up and then seeing like about a thousand police

officers, probably not a thousand, but in their riot gear and being like, oh, okay, that's what's going on, you know? Like - and that could be - that line of police officers could be for any of these things, for trans rights, for, you know, and all of these - all of these oppressions are totally against a God of love.

And so, if you're going to stand up, you know, if we are - if I am going to stand up for any of these things, I can pretty much expect - we can pretty much expect that we're going to get in trouble or we're going to be in danger of getting in trouble. And I think - and Paul got in trouble, you know. Paul got in lots of trouble and died actually, at the hands of Nero.

So, I don't know. I don't know what else to say. So, you know, I don't know what else to say, really. I think we're kind of wrapping up here but it's just to say that when we read Romans, you know, go in deeper.

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: Yeah. I mean I think, just to what you're saying about we're going to get in trouble, it's like if we - if we have chosen Jesus, we're already in trouble. In the context of Romans, like, to have chosen that, we're already in trouble. So, we've already died because we've made that choice, right? So, just as death no longer has dominion over Jesus, that fear no longer has dominion over us, or that's the theory.

And then I was just thinking about this last line. The death Christ died, He died to sin once and for all, but the life He lives, He lives to God. Which I think we could read as the life He lives, He lives to collective liberation, right? Like, the whole life is oriented toward the liberation of all beings. And maybe that's a place where we can leave it.

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: I agree. So, now we will have a word from our sponsors.

>> REV. DR. CELESTINE FIELDS: Thank you, Jean. Thank you, Nichola. We'd like to take a moment to thank ChurchWest for sponsoring the next segment of The Word is Resistance Podcast. ChurchWest provides insurance and risk solutions designed for every ministry. Now, back to our conversation with Jean and Nichola.

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: Thank you, Dr. Fields. We have a call to action. Every week on The Word is Resistance, there is a call to action, and this week our call to action is being mindful that

we are in Pride Month and to remember that the identities of LGBTQ people of the whole community are intersectional identities, and that BIPOC people, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, queer people, and trans people are the people who are in the most danger of violence at all times, especially Black trans women.

The death rate and the life expectancy of Black trans women is appalling and I don't have the statistics for this year but I - just know that.

So, remember that this Pride and be aware that there are multiple organizations that you can give to. Right here in our own conference, we have a church, Loomis Basin, that was under attack for supporting youth, trans and queer youth. They have an organization called The Landing Spot and they have a fund to bolster that organization. They were, this year, the target of violence from Proud Boys who threatened the pastor and threatened the members, threatened with bomb threats and death threats. So, give to The Landing Spot if you can and there will be - there are other projects too. The Trevor Project, which is a project lifting up queer youth, trans youth. There's the Black Trans Advocacy Coalition and the Black Trans Travel Fund. And links for all of those will be in the transcript.

So, that is our podcast for this week.

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: Yeah. We'd love your feedback. You can comment on our SoundCloud or Twitter or Facebook pages. You can fill out a survey on our podcast page at SURJ.org. And please give us a like or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast. We especially appreciate feedback from folks of color and non-Christian folks.

>> JEAN JEFFRESS: You can find out more about SURJ at SURJ.org. That's also where you can sign up for the SURJ Faith Updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links.

And finally, we want to thank our sound editor this week, Claire Hitchens. Thank you so much, Claire. And thank you, Dr. Fields, for bringing us here tonight.

So, blessings to all of you in all that you do. Love and liberation to you all. Until next time, I'm Jean Jeffress.

>> NICHOLA TORBETT: And I'm Nichola Torbett.

[MUSIC: "Building Up a New World"]

RESOURCES

REFERENCES

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